

THE HEART OF CANYON PASS

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THOMAS R. HOLMES



THE HEART OF
CANYON PASS



Hunt's arms were around the girl and he held her fast.
(Frontispiece)

THE HEART OF CANYON PASS

BY THOMAS K. HOLMES

AUTHOR OF
"The Man From Tall Timber," etc.



FRONTISPIECE BY
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THE HEART OF CANYON PASS

CHAPTER I

DISCONTENT AT CANYON PASS

THE bluebird was no harbinger of spring at Canyon Pass. Most of the inhabitants had never seen that feathered songster and many had never heard of it. Incidentally these same Passonians would not have known a harbinger in any case, presuming possibly that it was one of those new-fangled nipples for the hydraulic pipes at the Eureka Washings, or something fancy that Bill Judson was selling in cans at the Three Star Grocery.

But spring had unmistakably arrived at Canyon Pass when those two irrepressible pocket-hunters, Steve Siebert and Andy McCann, got together their frayed and rusty outfits, exchanged the hard-earned money each had toiled for during the winter over the counter of the Three Star for supplies and loaded each his burro till the sad-eyed little brutes

almost buckled under the weight of flour, beans, salt pork, coffee, and prospectors' tools.

Each ancient then mounted his moth-eaten cayuse, jerked the towline of his objecting burro, and proceeded out of town, Steve making the ford through the East Fork, while Andy plodded through the shallows of the West Fork, both bound down the canyon for the desert country which they hated with an unbelievably bitter hatred, yet which dragged the old men back to its grim barrens as soon as the spring freshets cleared the canyon and gulches of winter's accumulation of snow.

Canyon Pass was no beauty spot over which an artist might rave; nor was the landscape surrounding it even passably attractive to the eye. Man, in delving for nature's treasures in the rocky headlands and along the benches of the East and West Forks, had marred past redemption what little beauty of form and color the rugged wedge of land at the head of the canyon once possessed.

But on this morning there was a soft blur of blue haze padding the sharp outlines of the canyon walls and brooding over the higher hills. The streams flowing on either side of the town crooned instead of foaming boisterously in their beds, and where they joined to make Runaway River, which followed the bed of the canyon southerly, the thunder of their waters seemed hushed.

It was not yet sunrise, but a pearl-gray radiance

flooded the town and canyon as far south as one could see. Lights wavered drunkenly behind the window-panes of the all-night saloons and dance halls. This enticing spring morning followed the dregs of another riotous night in Canyon Pass.

The day before had been pay day at the Eureka Washings and the Oreode Company's diggings and at most of the major mining prospects in the vicinity. At noon the miners and other workmen had knocked off work, drawn their pay, and, cleaned up and dressed in holiday attire, had sought the amusement places of the town. From dark till dawn they had as usual torn the town wide open like a paper sack, to quote Bill Judson, as he stood in the doorway of his store and watched the two old desert rats leaving the dulling merriment and drunkenness behind them as they weaved their several ways out of sight on either bank of Runaway River.

"They've been doing this for twenty years," added Judson, pointing with his pipe stem to the disappearing prospectors. "An' to my knowledge and belief ain't neither of 'em struck a smell of paying color in all that time."

"That so?" returned Smithy, his gangling clerk, coming outside to stretch and yawn. Smithy had the look of a young man who was still in growth and he needed, as Judson said, "all outdoors to stretch in."

"Say! What's the matter with them two old sour doughs? All the time they was buyin' that stuff they never spoke a word to each other, and if one of 'em caught a look from t'other he snarled like a wild tagger! They'd have showed their teeth—both of 'em—if they'd had any left but stubs."

"Ain't spoke, to my knowledge," said the store-keeper, "Steve and Andy ain't, in all of these twenty years. 'Fore that they was as thick as hasty puddin' an' throwed in together ev'ry spring—even steven—when they went prospecting; comin' back yere to Canyon Pass in the fall as happy as a bride and groom returning from the honeymoon."

"What happened? What made 'em so sore on each other?" asked Smithy.

"Don't know. Never did know. Never could find out. 'Twas right after the big slide. You've heard tell o' that, even if you ain't been here six months?"

"A thousand times," returned Smithy in a bored tone.

"Well, Steve and Andy was perky as blackbirds in a strawyard that spring. 'Twas twenty years back. They hid out their camp somewhere near town that time. I always figgered they had a good prospect below there, in the canyon. 'Twas even reported that they took a sample of the right stuff to the assayer's office. But they was as close

mouthed as twin clams in the last stages of hydrophoby.

"Then come the slide. Most of us that was yere then didn't think of much for a week or two but whether Canyon Pass was goin' to be left on the map or not. Our stake was yere, and the slide acted like a stopper in Runaway River—like to plugged the old canyon for fair.

"Howsumever, when the channel was more or less clear again and we could come down off the roofs of our shacks, Steve and Andy showed up, but from different directions, as sore at each other as two carbuncles, and they ain't never been knowed to speak to one another since. Won't even drink at the same bar. The only time they come into the Three Star together is the morning they pull stakes for the desert."

Smithy yawned again. Steve Siebert and Andy McCann had now disappeared beyond outcropping warts of rock at the foot of the canyon walls.

Down the street from the direction of the mining shafts sunk in the heights behind the town strode a well-proportioned young man whose bootsoles rang on the patches of earth out of which the frost had not yet thawed. He was cleanly shaved and clean-looking, and stood more than six feet tall, with an air of frank assertiveness even in his carriage. He owned a high color under the wind-tan of his countenance, sandy hair, and brown eyes with

golden flecks in them when he was amused or when he was angry.

And Joe Hurley was usually swayed by one emotion or the other. Now he appeared to be amused as he came abreast of the Three Star Grocery.

"What's got you and Smithy up so early, Bill?" he asked.

"Dad burn it, Joe! Don't you know spring has come?"

"Pshaw! I thought I heard a tree-frog last night. So Steve Siebert and Andy McCann have lit out same as usual? We shall miss Steve at the Great Hope."

"Surest thing you know, Joe. They're on their way. And just as sociable as usual." Joe Hurley's eyes flashed with the gleam of fun that made him beloved of all who did not hate him. But before he could utter a comment the storekeeper added: "Wasn't you in to the Grub Stake to-night?"

Hurley wheeled to frown suddenly at the flickering lamps of Boss Tolley's gambling hall and cabaret almost directly across the street. The quick change of emotion reflected in his face betrayed the character of the man. Hurley was given to sudden impulses, usually spurred by the primal passions. Yet he was a strong man, too, and kept the lid on those passions if he desired.

"Nell's got some new songs," went on Judson slyly. "Right cute they are. She certainly is some

songbird, Joe. Dad burn it! She's too good for those roughnecks."

Hurley nodded slowly but did not show Judson his face at once, still watching the pale lights of the honkytonk fighting the advancing glow of the dawn. The storekeeper had not lived sixty-five years—thirty years of them right here in Canyon Pass—without gaining a pretty keen insight into human nature. He did not have to see that scowl on Joe Hurley's face. He knew what Joe was ruminating.

"And 'tain't only roughnecks that our Nell's too good for," pursued Judson finally. "The pizenest snakes, they tell me, is the prettiest. An' kids are tickled to look at pretties. Nell's only a kid after all."

"You're right, Bill!" ejaculated the mine owner with a snap of his jaws and his eyes sparking from no good humor.

He glanced balefully at the Grub Stake, his face set grimly, almost threatening.

There were fitful strains of music from within and still some clatter of feet and voices. Boss Tolley made it his boast that his show continued until the last reveler left.

The Grub Stake was a sprawling, T-shaped structure with the long bar and gaming tables in the shank of the T, the dance hall and stage at the rear. Beside the main entrance was the sign: "Check Your Guns and Spurs Here," and at the short

counter presided a young woman in a sleeveless silk jersey and kneelength satin skirt, who dealt out brass checks and airy persiflage indiscriminately.

The rosewood bar, behind which Boss Tolley and his three barmen sweated at the height of the revelry, had cost a fortune to freight over the trail to Canyon Pass. The gaudy oil painting which hung back of the bar, to hear Boss Tolley tell it, had cost him a second fortune.

Dick Beckworth, who was Tolley's chief dealer at the tables of chance, was a privileged character. He was supposed to be a "killer" with the ladies. He dressed his long curls and heavy black mustache as carefully as he did his sleek and slender person. Cream-colored flannel shirt, a flowing tie, velvet jacket and broadcloth trousers tucked into patent-leather boots, and a Mexican sombrero heavy with silver cord to top this ensemble, he made a picture to rival the squalid painting over the bar.

The night had been strenuous at the tables, but the gambling fever had now abated. Dick lolled gracefully in the armchair at his empty table with half-closed eyes, smoking a cigarette. Around a table near the archway between the barroom and the hall was a noisy group of miners, but they were no longer playing. Their glasses had just been refilled at the bar.

The rasping chords of a hard-working male quartette beyond the archway repeated a syncopated

rhythm for the entertainment of the patrons of the tables.

From beneath the arch into the barroom stepped suddenly an astonishingly brilliant figure—a figure engraved as sharply as a cameo against the blue mist of tobacco smoke that now drifted in a thin haze throughout the barnlike place. The group of miners about the first table roared a greeting.

“Nell! Nell Blossom! The blossom of Canyon Pass!”

“Give us a song of your own, Nellie!” added one burly miner, swaying from his seat toward her, a maudlin smile on his face.

The girl’s smiling expression changed swiftly to one of flaring fury. She swept past the miners and headed straight for Dick Beckworth, who had watched the incident with a little smile flickering about his lips. The girl’s face was still ablaze. She needed no rouge or lipstick in any case to lend it color.

“Dick,” she said tensely, “I hate this place!”

“I’ve already told you I hate to see you in it,” he rejoined with apparent frankness. “Singing and dancing for these roughnecks is far beneath you.”

The flame of her anger gradually waned as she gazed down into his face. His usual calmness was somewhat ruffled by her near presence. Nell Blossom held a certain influence over him that

"Dick the Devil"—his boasted cognomen among his admirers—was loath to acknowledge.

But she was sweet enough and pretty enough as she stood there to stir the most placid heart. Even the tawdry costume she wore could not detract from her charm, the red silk blouse with the V-shaped cut at the neck, belted velvet skirt to the tops of tiny riding-boots on tiny feet, her clustering curls of a golden-brown color crowned by a "cowgirl" hat—all worn as a costume in which to sing "Pony Boy," and "Cheyenne," which popular hits had finally reached Canyon Pass.

"I hate this place, Dick," she said again, now wearily dropping into a chair at his elbow.

Nell Blossom possessed one of those rare complexions that remind one of nothing so much as a ripe Alberta peach. The crimson of her cheeks was vivid, but tinted away into the creaminess of her satin skin. Her lips were not too red. Her nose was a nose to be proud of without being large. Her ears were visible and like the blossoms of the dogwood tree in texture and coloring.

"You know how I feel, Nell," said Dick, with a calm that belied his heartbeats. "I'm sick of all this, too." He gestured gracefully with the hand that held his cigarette. A jewel sparkled on that hand. "Canyon Pass is a dirty hole. If you say the word we'll get out of it. I've made a good stake. My rake-off has given me a full poke at last. We'll

go away from here, and I'll get into some paying business. I'll never turn a card again—for Boss Tolley or any other man. I mean it!"

The girl was looking straight into his eyes. He met that searching gaze as inscrutably as he had learned to endure the scrutiny of his opponent at the poker table.

"Do you mean it, Dick?"

"Just that." He nodded. "As I told you yesterday, say the word and we'll light out—now—this morning. You don't know much about the world outside of Canyon Pass, Nell, but I'll show it to you. And I love you—love you like the devil!"

There was a force in his final phrase, although he did not stir in his chair, that made her tremble. A vivid flush slowly dyed her cheeks and throat. It passed, to leave her blue eyes humid and her lips smiling.

"If you don't believe me——"

"I do," she interrupted. "I believed you yesterday. My saddlebags are all packed, Dick, and I'm ready just whenever you are."

A sudden electric tremor passed through the man's nerves. He veiled his eyes for a moment that she might not see what flared into them. He rose with her.

"Get into your riding clothes and we'll start. I'll meet you with my horse in half an hour," he said almost sternly.

But his eyes now answered her look of gratefulness and adoration with what she thought was a reflection of her own chaste desire.

So it came about that two other riders left Canyon Pass on this spring morning while the sun still lingered abed, and, crossing the West Fork an hour behind Andy McCann, unlike him chose the wagon-track to the summit of the canyon wall on that side of Runaway River.

"Which way do we go, Dick? To Crescent City?"

"South," he returned, without looking at her.

"We-ell. Lamberton is further but there's a parson there, too. That's another reason why I've come to hate Canyon Pass. It isn't decent like other towns—or even up-to-date. It never had a church or a parson. It's got everything else—saloons, gambling halls, honkytonks, stores, a bank, a hotel, a stamp mill, an express office, even a school, such as it is. But it's heathen—plumb heathen, Dick."

He smiled at her then, rather a superior smile. "It's not the only mining town that answers your description."

"I know it," Nell rejoined. "But I want to see the other kind of towns. Mother Tubbs says Canyon Pass ain't got no heart, and she's right. She says she can't even tell when Sunday comes, only that Sam always comes home drunk that day. This

is Sunday, Dick. It's a good day on which to begin a new life."

"Oh, life's all right," the gambler said easily. "Take it as you find it, Nell."

They came up into the sunlight on the rim of the canyon wall. Once on the level trail their horses broke into a canter. They could look down at certain points into the sink of the canyon where Runaway River foamed in its narrow channel. They spied Steve Siebert with his outfit traveling on the river trail. McCann, of course, they could not see, for the canyon wall on this side was almost sheer.

Ahead, as they rode on, was the Overhang—that monstrous projection capping the scarp of the cliff, left ages ago when the canyon was roughed out by the glacial floods to threaten the pass below with utter extinction if its bulk ever fell. Parts of it had fallen some twenty years previous. This was the "big slide" which had for a time choked the river channel with soil and rubble and threatened to flood out Canyon Pass.

The scar on the steep slope of the west wall down which that slide had fallen was now masked by a hardy growth of scrubby trees and brush. But the two old prospectors never passed the place, either going out of or returning to Canyon Pass, without keenly studying the scar.

Halfway up the height had been a shelf with a

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hollow behind it—an ideal spot for a secret camp, for it could be observed neither from the trail on the opposite side of the river nor from the rim of the west wall of the canyon. Buried as this shelf had been by the slide, Steve Siebert and Andy McCann now marked the spot—and what it hid—and then glanced sardonically at each other across the foaming river. They snarled at each other like a pair of toothless old wolves. The fruit of their joint toil that lay behind that slide, one could not reach, and the other could not compass. The secret had festered in their hearts and poisoned the very souls of the two ancients for these twenty years.

Above, the two in the plane of sunshine and freer air rode along the brink of the Overhang.

“Say!” Dick said jerkily. “Let’s not go to Lamberton—not direct.”

“What?”

There was a sharp note in her voice. She turned in her saddle to face him. Her gaze narrowed. Was there after all a doubt in the very depths of Nell’s soul about the man?

“I know a fine place—better hotel than at Lamberton—really a nice place to stop. We can reach it before night. Hoskins. You know?”

He still spoke nervously. Nell’s gaze no more left his face. She said evenly, as though her mind was quite placid again:

“There’s no parson at Hoskins, either.”

He darted her another side-glance. How was she taking it? Was she, after all, going to be "sensible?" Nell was seventeen, but a woman grown.

"Shucks, honey," Dick said, putting out a hand to touch her for the first time. "We'll ride on and find a parson later. We're in no rush. We're out for a grand, good time——"

She pulled her horse across the path with a fierce jerk of the bridle-rein, and so escaped the defilement of his touch. Her right hand clutched the handle of her quirt, the knuckles bone-white.

"Do you mean—you won't marry me?"

Dick smiled his most disarming smile, his brown eyes even twinkled. That frank and humorous look was what had first won his advantage with Nell Blossom.

"Shucks, honey," he drawled again. "Why so serious? Don't worry about that. I'm free to confess I'm not a marrying man. Seen too much trouble for both parties when they are tied to one another with any silly string of the law. It's love that will hold us together."

"That's heathen, Dick!" she exclaimed hotly. "Just as heathen as Canyon Pass."

"Nonsense!" He laughed. "You're just as safe with me, whether we're married or not."

Which might have been quite true, but Nell stared at him, her expression as inscrutable as his

own when he worked behind the green table. Dick the Devil was a shrewd gambler, but Nell Blossom had played poker herself ever since she could read the pips on the cards. And she had been fighting her own battles in harsh environment and against men almost from the same tender age. Her cold rage now sprang from the fact that he should so mistake her character.

"Come on, honey!" he said coaxingly.

The quirt came up slowly; then it sang through the air.

"You dog, you! Dick the Devil is your true name! And I thought——"

The man, shouting an oath, dragged his mount backward. The lash descended, missed his handsome face, but seared the horse across its neck.

Squealing, the animal leaped to one side—to the verge of the out-thrust lip of the Overhang. The gambler wheeled him again, seeking to save himself.

"Do you want to murder me—you wildcat!" he cried angrily.

There was a sudden crack, like the slapping of one board upon another. Between the plunging horse and the girl a gap yawned in the earth. Frost, the early rains, or perhaps time itself, had weakened this bit of the Overhang. A patch no larger than a good-sized dining table broke away and slid outward.

The scrambling, wild-eyed horse and the shrieking, white-faced man disappeared with it. The girl held in her own mount with a firm hand. The flare of insane anger faded from her blue eyes. But her countenance settled into a harsh and unlovely expression.

Yet she slipped down from her saddle, quieted her horse with a word, and stepped recklessly to the crumbling edge, trying to see down the face of the cliff.

She could mark no trace of horse or rider. She could no longer hear the rumble of the falling débris. An icy horror gripped her. He was gone!

Finally she drew back from the brink. She looked about at the landscape, but there was not a human being to be seen. She slowly mounted her horse again.

Something besides a terrible disaster had happened here at the brink of the Overhang. Something had happened to Nell Blossom so great, so soul-racking, that she would never be altogether the same girl again. It is a dreadful thing for one so young to find its love-idol shattered.

After a little Nell started her mount, but she did not ride back toward Canyon Pass.

CHAPTER II

DISCONTENT AT DITSON CORNERS

THE Reverend Willett Ford Hunt read twice these closing words of the long letter.

. . . and so, my dear Willie, to use your own way of expressing it, I am steering straight for the devil—and enjoying the trip immensely.

Wishing you were with me, Willie, I am, even after your rather bitter castigation,

Sincerely your friend,

JOE HURLEY.

He laid the missive on his desk with a full-bosomed sigh. Nor was that sigh wholly because of the reprobate Joe. Joe's flowers of speech did not much ruffle the parson's spirit.

Joe Hurley might be gay, irresponsible, reckless, even downright wicked; but he never could fail to be kind. Two years of close contact with the blithe Westerner—those final two years at college before Hunt went to the divinity school—had assured the latter that Joe Hurley owned a heart of gold. The gold might be tarnished, but it was true metal nevertheless.

Hunt's mental picture of his college friend, and

never had scholastic friendship been more astounding, could not include any great blemish of later-developed character. It was five years since they had seen each other. Those five years could not have made of Joe Hurley the "roughneck" that he intimated he had become. That was Joe's penchant for painting with a wide brush.

The reputation the Westerner had left behind him at college when he was requested by a horrified governing board to depart for the sake of the general welfare of the undergraduate body, revealed Joe's character unequivocally.

When Joe had been "bounced" by the faculty he had celebrated the occasion by giving a farewell banquet at one of the shadiest hotels in the college town, to the wildest crowd of students he could get together. On his own part Joe had dressed in full cowboy regalia, and as the apex of the evening's entertainment he had "shot up" the banquet room, paying the bill for damages the next morning with a cheerful smile.

The Reverend Willett Ford Hunt remembered the occasion now with a little shiver of apprehension. Suppose the people of Ditson Corners should ever learn that he, their pastor, had been one of that company who had helped Joe Hurley celebrate his dismissal from scholastic halls!

Joe's father, a cattleman, had left him a considerable fortune. Joe had invested much of it in a

certain mining claim called the Great Hope, for the young fellow had been keen enough to see that the day of the small cattleman was gone. The mine was paying a comfortable income with the promise of doing more than that in the future, so Joe wrote. But he wrote more—much more that was exceedingly interesting to Hunt in his present discontented state of mind.

He picked up the letter again to re-read a part of the third page, this broken sentence first meeting his envious eye:

... and if ever there was a peach, she surely is one, Willie. Golden-brown hair, big blue eyes, and a voice—Say! No songbird ever had anything on Nell. If you once saw her and heard her sing, you'd go crazy about her, old sobersides. All Canyon Pass—I mean the men-folks—are at her feet again, now she has returned to town and is singing in Colorado Brown's cabaret. Sounds sort of devilish and horrid, doesn't it, Willie? Believe me, Nell Blossom is some girl. But wild—say! You can't get near her. She's got a laugh that plays the deuce with a man's heart strings—accelerates the pit-a-pat of the cardiac nerve to top-notch and then some! She's got us all on her string, from gray-bearded sour doughs to the half-grown grocery clerk at the Three Star, who would commit suicide to-morrow at her behest—believe me!

But no man, Willie, has seemed yet to put the come hither on Nell Blossom. She just won't be led, coaxed, or driven. She's as hard as molded glass. A man-hater, if ever you heard of one. With all your famed powers of persuasion, reverend, I'd like to make a wager that you couldn't mold our Nell into a pattern of the New England virtues, such as your own prim little sister has become by this time, I've no doubt. No insult to Miss Betty intended, Willie. But our Nell—well, you'd have your

hands full in trying to make her do a thing that she did not want to do.

The Reverend Willett Ford Hunt was stung here, not by the good-natured raillery aimed at his own traits of character by his old college mate. But why had Joe gone out of his way to drag Betty's name into it? It seemed to be a mild slur upon his sister's character, and Hunt had an uneasy feeling that he ought to resent it.

Betty had met Joe Hurley but once—to Hunt's knowledge. It was an occasion when she had stopped at the college town on her way home from boarding school. Hunt had met her at the station, and Joe had shown up, too. The three of them had sought a restaurant where they ate, and Betty had chattered like—well, just as a girl of her age and fresh from the excitement of boarding school would chatter. When her first fear of the big Westerner had worn off she had usurped the conversation almost completely. Hunt had often thought since that Joe Hurley was quite attracted by his lively sister.

But how did Joe know that Betty had changed so?

That his sister was not the same cheerful, brisk, chatterbox of a girl she had been when Joe met her, Hunt quite well knew. And the change puzzled him.

He visualized their Aunt Prudence Mason, who had lived all her long life in the rut of New Eng-

land spinsterhood, molding more or less the characters of the orphaned brother and sister left at an early age to her sole care. Was Betty, here in the straitened environment of Ditson Corners, doomed to jog along the well-beaten track Aunt Prudence had followed? The brother shuddered as he thought of it.

He glanced at Joe's letter once more. A golden-haired, blue-eyed girl who really sang—not shrieked as did Miss Pelter whose top notes in the church choir rasped Hunt's nerves like a cross-cut saw dragged through a pine knot.

There was always a quarrel of some kind in that choir—the bickerings and heart-burnings of his volunteer church choir were perennial.

Then, there was the feud over the Ditson pew—which branch of the influential Ditson family should hold the chief seats in the church. Hunt could not satisfy everybody. There was still a clique, even after his two years' pastorate, who let it be frankly known that they had desired to call Bardell, instead of him, to the pulpit of the First Church.

These continued faultfindings and disputes were getting on Hunt's nerves. And they must be affecting Betty—influencing her more than he had heretofore considered.

This letter from Joe Hurley had come at a moment when Hunt was desperately and completely out of tune with his environment. He had brought

to his first pastorate a modicum of enthusiasm which, during the first year, had expanded into an earnest and purposeful determination to do his duty as he saw it and to carry his congregation in spirit to the heights he would achieve.

He—and they—had risen to a certain apex of spiritual experience through the first months of his earnest endeavor, and then the cogs had begun to slip. Suddenly Willett Ford Hunt's castles toppled and collapsed about him. He found himself, half stunned, wholly mazed, wallowing in the débris of his first church row, the renewed war over the Ditson pew.

Hunt had extricated himself from this cataclysm with difficulty, almost like a man lifting himself off the earth by his bootstraps. The Ditson feud was by no means at an end even now, and it never would be ended as long as two Ditsons of different branches of the family remained alive. Hunt had sought to renew his own and his congregation's spiritual life. It was then and not until then that he discovered the fire was out.

Oh, for a church where one might preach as one pleased, so long as one followed the spiritual instincts aroused by right living and a true desire to help one's fellow men! That is what Hunt said he longed for.

But actually what he longed for is what perhaps we all long for whether we know it or not—appre-

ciation. Not fulsome praise, not a mawkishly sentimental fawning flattery. He desired to feel that the understanding heart of the community apprehended what he wished to do and respected his effort though he might fall short of the goal.

There seemed to be no heart—understanding or otherwise—in Ditson Corners. Why! A wild Western mining camp, such as Joe said Canyon Pass was, could be no more ungrateful a soil to cultivate than this case-hardened, hide-bound, self-centered and utterly uncharitable Berkshire community.

The thought—not even audibly expressed—nevertheless shocked Hunt.

Hunt reached for the letter again. What had Joe said about there being a field for religious endeavor in Canyon Pass? It was along in the first part of the screed, and when he had found it he read:

Joshing aside, Willie, I believe you might dig down to the very heart of Canyon Pass—and I believe it has a heart. You were such a devil of a fellow for getting at the tap-root of a subject. If anybody can electrify the moral fiber of Canyon Pass—as some of them say I have the business part—it will be a man like you. You could do the "Lazarus, arise!" stunt if anybody could—make the composite moral man of Canyon Pass get up, put on a boiled shirt, and go forth a decent citizen. And believe me, the composite figure of the moral man here sadly needs such an awakening.

There was something that gripped Hunt in the rough and ready diction of this letter—something

that aroused his imagination. It brought to his mind, too, a picture of Joe himself—a picture of both his physical and his mental proportions.

The Reverend Willett Ford Hunt was no pigmy himself, nor did he lack courage and vigor. He was good to look upon, dark without being sallow, crowned with a thick brush of dull black hair—there were some brown lights in it—possessing good features, keen gray eyes, broad shoulders, a hundred and eighty pounds of gristle and flesh on a perfect bony structure, and could look over a six-barred gate before he vaulted it. He had not allowed his spiritual experiences, neither rising nor falling, to interfere with his gymnastics or his daily walk.

But Joe Hurley topped Hunt by two inches, was broader, hardier, a wholly out-of-door man. Joe was typically of the West and the wilderness. He knew the open places and the tall timber, the mountains and the canyons, the boisterous waters of cascade and rock-hemmed river. He was such an entirely different being from Hunt that the latter had often wondered why the Westerner had made such a chum and confidant of him during those two years at college.

And now the pastor of Ditson Corners' First Church realized that Joe Hurley had something that he wanted. He wished he was with Joe, out there in that raw country. He felt that he could get nearer to mankind out there and perhaps—he said

it reverently—nearer to the God he humbly desired to serve. He thought of Betty.

"She needs a change as much as I do. How does Joe guess that she is becoming exactly a prim, repressed, narrow-thinking woman, and a Martha cumbered by many cares? She needs her chance as much as I need mine."

He heard Betty's step on the porch, and in a moment she entered the study, her hands full of those grateful mid-spring flowers, the lily of the valley.

Betty Hunt was not a fragile girl, but she did not possess much of that *embonpoint* the Greeks considered so necessary to beauty of figure. Nor was she angular. At least, her grace of carriage and credibly tailored frock masked any lack of flesh.

Slim hands she had, too,—beautiful hands, very white and with only a faint tracery of blue veins upon them. Really, they were a musician's hands—pliable, light of touch, but strong. The deftness with which they arranged the flowers suggested that she did not need vision to aid in the task.

Therefore she kept her gaze on Hunt. He felt it, turned, and smiled up at her. He shook the leaves of the letter in his hand.

"Bet," he said, "I've got another letter from Joe Hurley."

Betty's countenance changed in a flash.

"Oh! That Westerner?"

There was more than disapproval in her tone. She looked away from him quickly. Her own gray eyes filmed. A shocked, almost terrified expression seemed to stiffen all her face. But Hunt did not see this.

"There is no use talking, Bet," her brother pursued in an argumentative way, thoughtfully staring at the letter again. "There is no use talking. Joe has it right. We are vegetating here. Most people in towns like this, here in the East, might honestly be classified among the *flora* rather than the *fauna*. We're like rows of cabbages in a kitchen garden."

"Why, Ford!"

He grinned up at her—a suddenly recalled grimace of his boyhood.

"There speaks the cabbage, Bet! We're all alike—or most of us are. Here in the old Commonwealth I mean. We're afraid to step aside from the rutted path, to accept a new idea; really afraid to be and live out each his own individuality.

"Ah! Out in this place Joe writes about——"

He fingered the sheets of the letter again. She watched with the slow fading of all animation from her face—just as though a veil were drawn across it by invisible fingers. Her expression was not so much one of disapproval—her eyes held something entirely different in their depths. Was it fear?

"This Canyon Pass is a real field for a man's efforts," burst out Hunt with sudden exasperation.

"I tell you, Bet, I feel as though my usefulness here had evaporated. I haven't a thing in common with these people. Carping criticism and little else confronts me whichever way I turn."

"You—you are nervous, Ford."

"Nerves! What right has a man like me with nerves?" he demanded hotly.

"But, Ford—your work here?"

"Is a failure. Oh, yes. I can see better than you do, Bet—more clearly—that I have lost my grip on these people."

"Surely there are other churches in the East that would welcome a man of your talents."

"Aye! Another little hard-baked community in which I shall find exactly the elements that have made my pastorate here a failure."

"You are not a failure!" she cried loyally.

"That's nice of you, Bet. You are a mighty good sister. But I am letting you in for a share of the very difficulties that would soon put gray in my hair and a stone in my bosom instead of a heart."

"Oh, Ford!"

"Out there—in some place like this Joe writes about—would be a new and unplowed field. A place where a man could develop—grow, not vegetate."

"But—but must it necessarily be the West, Ford? I am not fond of the West."

"You've never seen it."

"I'm not fond of Western people."

He looked at her with a dawning smile. "You're afraid of them, Bet."

"Yes. I am afraid of them," whispered his sister, turning her face away from his gaze. "They are not our kind, Ford."

"That's exactly it," he cried, smiting the desk with the flat of his palm. "We need to get out into the world, among people who are just as different from 'our kind,' as you term them, as possible. There we can expand. Out in Canyon Pass. I believe I could be a real help to that community. What is it Joe says?" He glanced again at the letter before him. "Yes! I might dig down to the very heart of Canyon Pass. Ditson Corners has merely a pumping station to circulate the blood of the community, patterned after the one at the reservoir on Knob Hill."

She did not speak again. When Hunt looked around she had stolen from the room.

"Poor Bet!" he muttered. "The idea of change alarms her as it might have alarmed Aunt Prudence. Joe Hurley is right—he's right beyond a doubt!"

CHAPTER III

A SHADOW THROWN BEFORE

A RIDER had his choice in journeying to Canyon Pass from a southerly direction—say from Lamber-ton, which lies between the railroad and the desert—of following the river trail to be deafened by the boisterous voice of the flood, or of climbing to the high lands and there jogging along the wagon track which finally dipped down the steeps to the ford of the West Fork and so into the mining town.

Spring was drifting into the background of the year. The cottonwood leaves were the size of squirrel ears. The new fronds of the piñon had expanded to full size and now their needles quivered in the heat of the almost summerlike day. Joe Hurley, sitting his heavy-haunched bay, giving as easily to the animal's paces as a sack of meal, followed the wagon track rather than the river trail and so came to that fork where wheel-ruts from a westerly direction joined the road along the brink of the canyon wall.

A cream-colored pony came cantering along the trail from Hoskins, its rider as gaily dressed as a Mexican vaquero—a splotch of color against the

background of the evergreens almost startling to his vision. But it was the identity of this rider that invigorated the tone of the mining man's reflections.

"Nell Blossom! The only sure-enough cure for ophthalmia! Am I going to have the pleasure of being your escort back to Canyon Pass? It will sure do me proud. The Passonians are honing for you, Nell."

"I'm going back to the Pass—yes, Mr. Hurley," she said, pulling down her pony to the more sedate pace of his big bay.

"Where you been since you left us all in the lurch? There was almost a riot at the Grub Stake when Tolley found out you had gone."

"Boss Tolley hasn't got anything on me," she said defensively. "I'd never sing there again, anyway."

"Somebody said you'd lit out for the desert with Steve Siebert and Andy McCann," and he chuckled. "They started the same day you vamoosed."

"I might just as well have gone with those old desert rats. Pocket hunting couldn't be much worse than Hoskins."

"Great saltpeter! What took you to Hoskins?" exclaimed Hurley. "Where's your local pride? If you weren't born at Canyon Pass, you've lived there most of your life. You shouldn't encourage a dump like Hoskins to believe for a moment that it has greater attractions than the Pass."

"If I thought it might be more attractive, I learned better," she said shortly.

"Mother Tubbs got a letter from you, but she wouldn't tell us where you were."

"No," Nell said. "I didn't want the boys riding over there and starting a roughhouse at the Tin Can Saloon."

"Great saltpeter!" exclaimed Hurley again. "You don't mean to say you been caroling your roundelays in *that* place?"

"A girl has to work somewhere, and I was sick to death of the Grub Stake."

"Boss Tolley is no pleasant citizen and his joint is no sweet-scented garden spot, I admit," Hurley agreed. "Personally I'd like to see Tolley run out of town and the Grub Stake eliminated. But Colorado Brown has opened a new place and is going to run it right—so he says."

"That's what is bringing me back," Nell confessed. "He got word to me by Mother Tubbs, and he made me a better offer than Tolley ever would. But I expect one cabaret is about like another in these roughneck towns."

"I don't know about that," the man said defensively. "We mean to try to clean up Canyon Pass. The boys have got to have amusement. Colorado Brown is a white man, and, if he gets the backing of the better element, he can give a good show and

sell better hootch and better grub than ever Boss Tolley dared to."

"Hootch is hootch," Nell interrupted. "It's all bad. There's nothing good about a rotten egg, Mr. Hurley. And the men's money is wasted in all those places—plumb wasted!"

He had been watching her closely as they talked. He had been watching Nell closely, off and on, for several years. Like many of the other young and unattached men of Canyon Pass, Joe Hurley had at one time attempted to storm the fortress of Nell Blossom's heart. Finally he had become convinced that the girl was not for him.

Joe Hurley neither wore his heart on his sleeve nor was he unwise enough to anger Nell by forcing his attentions beyond that barrier she had raised between them. His were merely the objections of any clean-minded man when he had seen her yielding to the machinations of Dick the Devil. Joe knew the gambler's kind.

He had felt no little anxiety when, with the usual spring exodus of the two old desert rats, Steve Siebert and Andy McCann, Nell and Dick Beckworth had likewise disappeared from the Grub Stake. Dick, of course, had settled with Boss Tolley; he intimated that he was starting north for the railroad at Crescent City. The hour had been so early that nobody else had chanced to see the gambler and the girl ride away. Nell was missed

later, and all the right thinking men of the town, although they said little, feared the worst for Nell Blossom.

Nell had displayed at the last some little interest in Dick the Devil. The other girls at the Grub Stake gossiped about it.

Then came Mother Tubbs with a bona-fide letter from the girl to dam the flood of gossip. Nell was working as usual in a cabaret. She had left Boss Tolley because she could not stand him any longer. She was bitter about the Grub Stake and its proprietor. And not a word in the letter about Dick Beckworth. It was plain, even to the most suspicious, that Dick had not gone with her after all.

These few facts colored Joe Hurley's thoughts as they rode along the track. What colored Nell's?

When the sprightly talk lapsed between them, the girl's face fell into unhappy lines. She who had been as blithe as a field lark all her life was showing to Joe Hurley for the first time a most unnatural soberness of spirit. Her eyes, their gaze fixed straight ahead, were filmed with remoteness that his friendly glance could not penetrate.

Something had changed Nell Blossom. She was no longer the happy-go-lucky girl she had been heretofore. He wondered if, after all, her affair with Dick Beckworth was serious.

They skirted the Overhang, their horses now at a canter. Nell suddenly pulled in her mount at a

place where a patch along the brink of the treacherous cap had recently crumbled.

"Looks as if there might have been a small slide," observed Hurley cheerfully.

"Was—was anybody hurt?"

"Reckon not. Just about where the big slide was years ago. There are always bits dropping down this cliff. I tell 'em there's bound to be another landslip some time that will play hob with Runaway River and maybe flood out the town again. It's like living over a volcano."

Nell still looked back at the broken edge of the cliff. "Nobody missing, then? Nobody—er—left town?"

He laughed. "Nobody but you and old Steve and Andy McCann. Those old desert rats lit out the same morning you left town. Hold on! I don't know as you know it; but Dick Beckworth went about that time. He's gone to Denver, so Tolley says, to deal faro at a big place there."

He could not see the girl's face. As far as he knew the statement made no impression upon her. They jogged on practically in silence until they came to the point where the wagon-track plunged steeply to the ford of the West Fork, and from which spot the squalid town was first visible.

"Ugh!" Nell shuddered and glanced at Joe again. "It is such an ugly place."

"Where's your civic pride, Nell?" and the other chuckled.

"What is there to be proud of?" was her sharp demand.

"It's a money-making town."

"Money!"

"Quite a necessary evil, that same money," he rejoined. "Gold is a good foundation to build a town upon. Canyon Pass has 'got a future in front of it,' as the feller said. Business is booming. Bank deposits are increasing. Three families have bought piano-players, and there are at least a dozen talking machines in town—besides the female citizens," and he laughed again.

"All that?" in a sneering tone. "Still, the bulk of the wages from the mines and washings are spent for drink and in gambling. The increase in bank deposits I bet are made by the merchants and honkytonk keepers, Mr. Hurley. Canyon Pass is prosperous—yes. But at the expense of everything decent and everybody's decency. Mother Tubbs has got it right. Canyon Pass hasn't got a heart."

"Oh—heart!"

"Yes, heart. There's neither law nor gospel, she says. Only such law as is enforced at the muzzle of the sheriff's gun. And as far as religion goes—when was there ever a parson in Canyon Pass?"

"They're rare birds, I admit. But you needn't blame me, Nell."

"I do blame you!" she exclaimed fiercely. "You're at fault—you, and Slickpenny Norris who runs the bank, and Bill Judson of the Three Star, and the manager of the Oreode Company, and the other more influential men. It is your fault that there isn't a church and other civilized things in Canyon Pass."

"Great saltpeter, Nell! You're not wailing for a Sunday School and a sky pilot?"

"Me? I reckon not!" She almost spat out the scornful denial. "I'm just telling you what your old Canyon Pass is. It's a back number. But I'm free to confess if a parson and a crew of psalm-singing tenderfoots came here, I'd like enough pull my freight again—and that time for keeps! Even Hoskins would be more endurable."

At this outburst Joe Hurley broke into laughter. Nell Blossom was paradoxical—had always been.

And yet, what Nell had said about the shortcomings of Canyon Pass stuck in Joe Hurley's mind. Within a few days the thought, fermenting within him, resulted in that letter which had so interested—not to say excited—the Reverend Willett Ford Hunt in far-away Ditson Corners.

CHAPTER IV

PHILOSOPHY BOUND IN HOMESPUN

"No, there ain't no news—no news a-tall," declared Mrs. Sam Tubbs, comfortably rocking. "Nothing ever happens in Canyon Pass. For a right busy town on its main street, there's less happens in the back alleys than in any camp I ever seen—and I seen a-plenty.

"It's in the back alleys o' life, Nell, that the interesting things happen. Folks buy and sell, and argue and scheme, and otherwise play the fool out on the main streets. But in the alleys babies is born, and people die, and boys and gals make love and marry. Them's the re'lly interesting things in life."

"Ugh! Love and marriage! They are the biggest fool things the world knows anything about."

Mother Tubbs chuckled. It was an unctuous chuckle. It shook her great body like a violent explosion in a jelly-bag and made the wide-armed rocking-chair she sat in creak.

"Sho!" she said. "I've heard seventeen-year-old gals say as much 'fore now, who dandled their second young-un on their knee 'fore they was

twenty. The things we're least sure of in this world is love and marriage. Lightning ain't nothin' to 'em—nothin'!

"Now, there's Mr. Joe Hurley——"

Nell started, turned on the top step of the Tubbs' back porch, and looked searchingly at the old woman with a frown on her brow.

"Now, there's Mr. Joe Hurley," pursued Mother Tubbs placidly. "There ain't a thing the matter with that man but that he needs a wife."

"Why doesn't he take one, then?" demanded Nell wickedly. "There are plenty of them around here whose husbands don't seem to care anything about them."

"Like me and my Sam, heh?" put forth Mother Tubbs, still amused. "But I reckon if Mr. Joe Hurley, or any other man, should attempt to run away with me, Sam would go gunning for him. What they call the 'first law of Nater'—which is the sense of possession, not self-preservation—would probably get to working in Sam's mind.

"He'd get to thinking of my flapjacks and chicken-with-fixin's and his bile would rise 'gainst the man—no matter who—who was enjoying them victuals.

"Oh, yes. Not only is the way to a man's heart through his stomach; but believe me, Nell, most men are like those people the Bible speaks of 'whose god is their stomach.' "

"Does the Bible say that, Mother Tubbs?" broke in the girl.

"Somethin' near to it."

"Then there is some sense in the Bible, isn't there?"

"Hush-er-you, Nell Blossom!" ejaculated the old woman sternly. "Does seem awful that you're such a heathen. The Bible's plumb full of good advice, and lovely stories, and sweet truths. I used to read it a lot before I broke my specs. But I remember lots that I read, thanks be."

"I don't care for stories," said the girl crossly. "And I don't know that I believe there is a heaven," she went on quickly. "Once you are dead I reckon that's all there is to it. I won't learn any more songs about heaven. I used to cry over them—and about folks dying. I remember the first song Dad taught me to sing in the saloons. It used to make me cry when I came to the verse:

Last night as I lay on my pillow—
Last night as I lay on my bed—
Last night as I lay on my pillow,
I dreamt that my Bonnie was dead.
Bring back! Oh, bring back!
Bring back my Bonnie to me, to me——

It's all stuff and nonsense!" she broke off with confidence.

"That ain't a hymn," said Mother Tubbs placidly. "Hymns is different, Nell. A good, uplifting hymn

like 'Am I a Soldier of the Cross,' or 'Beulah Land,' takes you right out of yourself—bears your heart up on wings o' hope and helps you forget you're only a poor, miserable worm——"

"I'm not a worm!" interrupted Nell with vigor. "I'm as good as anybody—as good as anybody in Canyon Pass, anyway, even if some of these women do look down on me."

"Of course you are, Nell. 'Worm' is just a manner o' speaking."

"Dad trained me to sing in these saloons, I know," went on the girl quickly, angrily, "because he was too weakly to use a pick and shovel. We had to eat, and he thought he had to have drink. So I had to earn it. But I've been a good girl."

"I never doubted it, Nell," Mother Tubbs hastened to say. "Nobody could doubt it that knowed you as well as I do." She let her gaze wander over the squalid back yards of the row of shacks of which the Tubbs' domicile was no better than its neighbors. "They don't know you like I do, Nell. You've lived with me for three years—all the time you was growing into a woman, as ye might say. You hafter do what you do, and I don't 'low when we are forced into a job, no matter what it is, that it's counted against us as a sin."

Nell flashed the placid old woman another glance. There was something hidden behind that look—of late there was something secretive in all Nell

Blossom said or did. Did Mother Tubbs understand that this was so? Was she, in her rude but kindly way, offering a sympathy that she feared to put into audible speech for fear of offending the proud girl?

The latter suddenly laughed, but it was not the songbird's note her voice expressed. There was something harsh—something scornful—in it.

"I reckon I could get away with murder, and you'd say I was all right, Mother Tubbs," she declared.

"Well, mebbe," the old woman admitted, her eyes twinkling.

"Suppose—" said Nell slowly, her face turned away again, "suppose a party was the cause of another's death—even if he deserved it—but didn't mean just that—suppose, anyway, what you did caused a man's death, for whatever reason, although unintended? Would it be a sin, Mother Tubbs?"

She might have been reflecting upon a quite casual supposition for all her tone and manner betrayed. Just how wise Mother Tubbs was—just how far-seeing—no human soul could know. The old woman had seen much and learned much during her long journey through a very rough and wicked world.

"I tell you, Nell," Mother Tubbs observed, "it's all according to what's in our hearts, I reckon. If what we done caused a party to die, and we had

death in our heart when we done the thing that killed him, I reckon it would be a sin. No getting around that. For we can't take God's duties into our hands and punish even the wickedest man with death—like we'd crunch a black beetle under our bootsole. 'Vengeance is Mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.' " She repeated the phrase with reverence. "No, sin is sin. And because a party deserves to be killed, in our opinion, don't excuse our killing him."

Nell was quite still for a minute. Then she shrugged her shoulders.

"Humph!" she said briskly. "I don't think much of your religion, Mother Tubbs. No, I don't."

Mother Tubbs began to croon:

It's the old-style religion,
The old-style religion,
The old-style religion,
That gets you on your way.
'Twas good enough for Moses,
Good enough for Moses—
The old-style religion,
That gets you on your way.

"It ain't no new-fangled religion, Nell. But it's comforting——"

"It wouldn't comfort me none," answered the girl. "I reckon it ain't religion—and a sky pilot—that Canyon Pass needs after all. If we'd just run about fifty of these tramps out of town—and Boss

Tolley and his gang—we could get along without psalm-singing and such flubdubbery.”

“You ain’t talking like you used to, Nell,” said the old woman, observing her curiously.

“I hadn’t thought so much about it. Religion is too soft. These roughnecks would ride right over a parson and—and that kind. Now, wouldn’t they?”

“Not altogether. I expect they’d try—at first. But if a man had enough grace in him, he’d stand up against ’em.”

“He’d better have backbone.”

“Same thing,” chuckled Mother Tubbs. “Same thing. It takes the grace of God to stiffen a man’s backbone—I tell you true. I hope this parson Mr. Joe Hurley talks about has got plenty of grace.”

“Who—what?” gasped the girl. “What parson?”

“Well, now! That is a gob o’ news. But I thought you must o’ heard it—over to Colorado Brown’s, or somewhere—the way you was talkin’. This parson is a friend of Mr. Joe Hurley, and he wants to get him out yere.”

“From the East?”

“Yeppy. Mr. Joe says he went to school with him. And he’s some preacher.”

“What do you think o’ that!” ejaculated Nell. “Mr. Hurley didn’t say anything to me about it the day we rode into the Pass together.”

"I reckon not. This has all been hatched up since then."

"But, Mother Tubbs!" cried the girl. "You don't expect any tenderfoot parson can come in here and make over Canyon Pass?"

"I reckon not. We folks have got to make ourselves over. But we need a leader—we need a Shower of the Way. We've lost our eyesight—the best of us—when it comes to seeing God's ways. My soul! I couldn't even raise a prayer in conference meeting no more. But I used to go reg'lar when I was a gal—played the melodeon—led the singin'—and often got down on my knees in public and raised a prayer."

"Humph!" scoffed the girl. "If God answered prayer, I bet you prayed over Sam enough to have cured him of getting drunk forty times over!"

"I don't know—I don't know," returned Mother Tubbs thoughtfully. "I been thinking lately that, mebbe when I was praying to God to save Sam from his sins, I was cursing Sam for his meanness! I ain't got as sweet a disposition as I might have, Nell."

"Oh, yes you have, Mother Tubbs!" exclaimed Nell, and suddenly jumped up to kiss the old woman warmly. "You're a dear, sweet old thing!"

"Well, now," rejoined Mother Tubbs complacently, "I ought to purr like any old tabby-cat for that."

CHAPTER V

HOW THE PASSONIANS TOOK IT

"WELL," observed Bill Judson oracularly, "it's about time for something new to break in Canyon Pass. About once in so often even a dead-an'-alive camp like this yere has got to feel the bump of progress from the train behind. Otherwise we'd stay stalled till Gabriel's trump."

He spoke to Smithy, his single clerk at the Three Star Grocery. He had to speak to Smithy, or to the circumambient air, for nobody but the gangling clerk was within hearing. They lounged on the store porch in the middle of the afternoon, and the only other thing alive on the main street of Canyon Pass was a wandering burro browsing on the tufts of grass edging the shallow gutters.

"I don't see as Canyon Pass has got to be bumped by a gospel sharp to wake it up," complained Smithy, stretching his arms as though they were elastic. "Yahhoo! Well, he'll have a sweet time here, Mr. Judson."

"I dunno," said the storekeeper reflectively. "For my part I feel like I favored it."

"'Cause it's something new?"

"'Cause it's something needed. I ain't one of those fellers that run after every new thing just because it is new. But I'm for progress. I want to see the Pass get ahead. Crescent City and Lamberton have both got churches and parsons."

"And they've got railroads," put in Smithy, making a good point. "Canyon Pass needs the railroad more'n it does a parson."

"Son," proclaimed Judson, "before Canyon Pass can get a railroad connection, mountains have got to be moved and the meanest stretch of desert that ever spawned lizards, sidewinders and cacti, and produce in their places about five hundred square mile of irrigated farmland to pay for spiking the rails to the sleepers. See?"

"Well, the farms might come," declared Smithy defensively.

"Sure. So might Christmas come at Fourth o' July. But we ain't never celebrated the two holidays together yet. No, sir. To irrigate the edge of that desert even, a dam would have to be built across the southern outlet of the canyon, and that would back the water up yere in freshet season till the roof of my shack would be so deep under the surface that about all I could properly keep in stock would be perch and rainbow trout.

"They ain't building branch railroads no more to mining camps like Canyon Pass. That's why we all chipped in for the stamp mill and the cyanide

plant. Nop. We'll freight in our supplies with mules and communicate with the more effete centers of civilization by stagecoach for some time to come I reckon.

"That being the case we got to uplift ourselves without the help of the iron horse, as the feller said. And having a church and a parson is uplifting."

"Nobody ain't talked very brash about a church."

"Parson comes first. Naturally. Of course this friend of Joe Hurley is only coming on a visit at first."

"He'll have a sweet visit here," repeated Smithy.

"That's according," said Judson. "We got to be hospitable. If a judge, or a senator, or a school teacher, or even a drummer sellin' fishin' tackle, came yere we'd feel like we wanted to show him the town's best side. Why not this parson?"

"Huh! A drummer don't try to convert us and innovate psalm-singing and such," grumbled Smithy.

"Son," drawled Judson, his eyes twinkling under his bushy brows, "you're convicted of sin right now. You're scare't of this parson—and that's the trouble with most of you fellers who are raising a yawp against progress as represented by this Reverend Hunt."

"'Taint only us fellers," grumbled Smithy. "Some of the womenfolk ain't pleased. Say! Nell says she don't want no black-coated parson in this

camp. Says it would give her the willies, so she couldn't sing."

It was an indisputable fact—Joe Hurley himself had discovered it—that the Passonians were divided upon the matter of the expected coming of the Reverend Willett Ford Hunt. The sheep and the goats that had heretofore milled together in a general herd, were dividing upon strictly religious lines. Joe was somewhat surprised. Some of the very people he had presumed would welcome the innovation, were suspicious of it.

Mr. Robertson Norris, "Slickpenny" Norris was his undignified appellation, became quite red of face and beat rather a futile fist upon the banking counter as he gave his opinion to Joe Hurley. Norris was a puny-looking, string-bean sort of man. The height of rage could not have made his appearance impressive.

"Joe Hurley, you are a director of this bank, and your last statement of the Great Hope shows that you are a good mining man. I find on most subjects you display good sense. But on this question you're all wrong—all wrong!"

"I don't get you—I don't get you at all," drawled Hurley. "A moral man like you, Norris, I reckoned would welcome the idea of having a parson in the town."

"I have no quarrel with parsons—none at all, Joe," declared the banker. "But Canyon Pass is in

no present shape—financially, I mean—to contemplate the building of a church edifice. A church is something you can't tax, and it brings in absolutely no revenue to the town. It's not an asset, but a liability, and the Pass can't afford any such luxuries at this time."

"Great saltpeter!"

"Listen to me, Joe Hurley! I've advocated proper town improvements, even when they take the skin off my own nose, and always will. I am strong for Main Street being paved and sidewalks laid, though 'twould cost me a pretty penny. We ought to set out trees. Them oil lamps on wooden posts are a disgrace. I'd make every merchant paint the front of his buildings on Main Street once a year, by law."

"Well! What's the matter with a church?" demanded Hurley. "That is, if we get that far."

"It's absolutely no use. If one is built it won't be nothing but a shack. It won't add anything to the importance of the town. No, I don't approve. I'm disappointed in you, Joe."

"All right—all right!" cried Joe in some heat. "But I'm not disappointed in you, old-timer. Great saltpeter! I wonder what you did before you drifted into Canyon Pass that a parson and religion are likely to bring fresh into your memory."

With this backhand slap at the banker, the young man went out. It was rather odd that Joe Hurley,

like Bill Judson, should suspect the Passonians of the same secret reason for not desiring a spiritual refreshment of the town. But then, both the store-keeper and the owner of the Great Hope were observant of human nature and knew Canyon Pass and its inhabitants very well.

Joe Hurley's proposal was rattling the dry bones. If he saw two men conversing on the street, with both their arms and whiskers waving in the breeze, he might be sure the topic under discussion was the coming of "that gospel-sharp Joe Hurley's sicked on to us."

If two housewives met in midflight between store and store in the course of a forenoon's shopping, the principal subject of gossip was bound to be the possibility of a parson settling in Canyon Pass. Nor did the feminine opinion always march with that of Mother Tubbs.

In spite of the emancipation of the sex and its introduction to the high office of the ballot, the women of the mining town were—like women everywhere—considerably influenced by the expressed opinions of their husbands, brothers, and sons. If Charlie Raidlaw, who dealt faro for Boss Tolley, or Phin Shattuck, one of Colorado Brown's "gentlemanly mixers," gave it as his opinion that a white-livered, lily-handed parson was going to be a pest in the town and sure to hurt business, Mrs. Charlie and Sue Shattuck, Phin's sister, were pretty

sure to scout the idea that a parson in the Pass would be any improvement.

"It's needed," Rosabell Pickett announced with conviction. Rosabell played the piano in the Grub Stake, painted her face like a Piute Indian, dressed as gaudily as a circus poster, and was the only employee Boss Tolley had who really was not afraid of him. In fact, Rosabell was not afraid of any man and had small respect for most; she was frank in saying so. A girl can be a piano player in a honkytonk and be long on self-respect. Rosabell approved of herself—quite.

"It's needed," repeated Rosabell. "I wish he'd preach in the street out there, just stir up the people till they was with him, every one, and then march in here with an ax and smash every hootch bottle behind your bar, Tolley—that's what I wish."

"You're crazy, Rosie!" cried the proprietor of the Grub Stake. "I'd hafter go a-gunnin' for any man that tried to smash up my business thataway, and that wouldn't make the Grub Stake friends. You oughtn't to bite the hand that feeds you, Rosie. If it wasn't for the Grub Stake—and me—you wouldn't be wearin' rhinestone shoebuckles."

"Is that so?" countered the young woman. "You needn't worry none about my biting your hand 'nless you keep it washed oftener than is your present habit. And I want you to know that I don't sell

my opinions when I take the Grub Stake's pay-envelope—not much!”

“Well, I wanter see that dratted parson come in yere!” said Tolley blusteringly.

“He won't come alone,” put in Hurley, who had been listening at the bar to the argument.

“Huh?”

“I say he won't come in here alone. I might as well serve notice here and now that this Parson Hunt is a friend of mine. I don't never aim to throw a friend down or fail him when he gets into a jam. If he comes in here—for any purpose, Tolley—I'll likely be with him.”

“You keep him out o' yere! You keep him out!” blustered the other. “We don't want no sky pilots here in the Pass. Anyway, I won't have 'em in the Grub Stake.”

A burly fellow in overalls and riding boots broke in. He had already sampled Tolley's red-eye more deeply than was wise.

“You say the word, boss,” he growled, “and we'll run the preacher out o' town.”

Joe Hurley looked at the ruffian coldly. “You won't run anybody out of town, Hicks—not any,” the mine owner said. “But I'll tell you something that may be worth your attention. If Canyon Pass ever gets up on its hind legs and rares and starts to run certain tramps and ne'er-do-wells out of town, I'm ready to lay a bet with any man that

you'll be right up in the forefront of them that are chased out. Get me?"

Hicks, scowling, dropped his hand to the gunbutt peeping above the waistband of his overalls. Joe Hurley did not flicker an eyelash nor move a finger. Finally Hicks lurched away with an oath and went out through the swinging doors.

"And that's that," said Rosabell briskly, cutting the tense chord of silence. "I always did say the more of a boozier a man is, the quicker he'll take water. I hope your friend Mr. Hunt, Joe, has got backbone same as you have. Is he an old gentleman?"

"Not so you'd notice it," replied Hurley with a sudden grin.

He remained awhile to bandy repartee with Rosabell and some of the other idlers. But Boss Tolley slipped out of the honkytonk, although he did not follow Hicks.

Mulligan Lane ran at the rear of the stores, saloons, and other amusement places facing this side of Main Street. Colorado Brown's cabaret was not far from Tolley's rear door. It was dusk of rather a sultry day—a day that had forecast the heat of the approaching summer.

Tolley lounged under the withered cottonwood behind Brown's dance-pavilion. The sign of the flood's highwater mark—that flood of twenty years before—had been cut by some idle knifeblade deep

into the bole of the tree high over Tolley's head, and he was a tall man. A sallow-faced, bony giant of a man was Tolley, hairy and brawny, without a redeeming feature in his cruel countenance. Had he not possessed, in the memorable words of Bill Judson, "a wishbone where his backbone should have been," Boss Tolley would have been a very dangerous man. Lacking personal courage he depended upon the backing of men like Hicks and his bouncer, Macpherson.

He slouched now under the tree and waited—a sullen lump of a figure whose dark garments blended with the shadowy trunk as the night fell. The small figure coming up the slope of the lane approached the back door of Colorado Brown's place without seeing the man until almost within arm's length.

"Hey, Nell!" She started, looked up, stepped back a pace. "Don't be scare't of me."

"Don't flatter yourself, Tolley," replied the girl curtly.

"I want to speak with you."

"I don't want to speak to you."

"Say—listen! You ain't treating me right. You walked out and left me flat. You didn't even ask me for a raise. How'd you know I wouldn't give you as much as Brown does?"

"I didn't want to know. I got through. You didn't have any hold on me, Tolley."

"Mebbe not. Mebbe I have. You better listen," for the girl was turning scornfully away. "You and Dick played it low down on me."

Now she gave him her full attention. It was so dark under the tree that he could not see her face clearly, but he knew some sudden emotion shook her. To himself he grinned.

"I got to admit my losing you and Dick has put a crimp in the Grub Stake's business. You was my best performer, and Dick Beckworth was the best card-sharp I had. Looker here! You come back to the Grub Stake and—and I won't say nothing more."

"What do you mean?" She had almost instantly gained control of herself. "You can say all you like. I am never going to sing in your joint again."

"You ain't?"

"No."

"You better think again." His voice was grim, menacing. "I can say something you won't like to hear."

"Say it." She spat the command out as boldly as was her usual speech; but in her heart sudden fear fluttered like a netted bird.

"I been tellin' them Dick Beckworth lit out for Crescent City, and that I heard later he was dealing 'em in Denver."

"Dick Beckworth?" gasped the girl.

"Yeppy. I told 'em that. But I know derned well he didn't ride north that day——"

"Why do you speak to me of Dick Beckworth?"

She tried to say it boldly, calmly. She stared at him in the dusk, her figure tense. He could see her blue eyes gleam like twin sapphires.

"I'm telling you. Listen," whispered Tolley hoarsely. "I could show 'em the bones of Dick's hoss in the gravel below the Overhang—right at the edge of Runaway River. I got his saddle right now in my big safe. What do you say to that?"

"Dick——"

"I reckon you know how the hoss and the saddle went over the cliff. And Dick was with 'em. He wasn't with 'em when I raked out the saddle. Dick had gone to some place a dern sight more distant than Crescent City—nor yet Denver."

She was silent. He could hear her quick, labored breathing. Satisfaction fired all the mean soul of the man.

"You think it over, Nell."

He turned and lurched heavily away. The girl stood rooted to the place, more shaken, more terrified, than even Boss Tolley suspected. He was out of sight before she gained strength to move.

CHAPTER VI

THE APPROACH

IN fairylike trceries the tiny drops of a mistlike rain embroidered the broad pane of the Pullman. Betty Hunt gazed through this at the flying fields and woods, the panorama of the railroad fences, and the still nearer blur of telegraph poles with that hopeless feeling a sentenced prisoner must have as he journeys toward the prison pen.

Everything she cared for save her brother, everything she knew and that was familiar to her daily life, every object of her thought and interest, was being left behind by the onrush of the train. Time, with a big besom, was sweeping her quiet past into the discard—she felt it, she knew it! They would never go back to Ditson Corners again, or to Amberly where they had lived as children with Aunt Prudence or to any similar sanctuary.

That was what Betty had most longed for since her last term at boarding school, which had ended for her so abruptly with the death of her Aunt Prudence Mason. Her last previous journey by train had been that somber one to the funeral. When Betty and her brother had later moved to

the Ditson Corners' parsonage they had done so by motor.

The drumming of the wheels over the rail-joints kept time with the swiftly flying thoughts of the girl. She lay in the corner of the broad, tan-plush seat like a crumpled flower that had been carelessly flung there. Thoughts of that last train journey seared her mind in hot flashes, as summer lightnings play about the horizon at dusk.

First one thing, then another, she glimpsed—mere jottings of the happenings that had gone before the hurried good-bys at school and the anxious trip homeward. These remembrances now were like the projection of a broken film upon the moving picture screen.

And those trying, anxious weeks which followed the funeral while Ford was completing his divinity course and received his ordination and which came to an end with his selection as pastor of the First Church at Ditson Corners! All through these weeks was the dull, miserable pain of disillusion and horror that Betty must keep to herself. She could not tell Ford. She could tell nobody. What had happened during the last few weeks at school was a secret that must be buried—buried in her mind and heart as deeply as Aunt Prudence was buried under the flowering New England sod.

Betty, with her secret, was like a hurt animal that hides away to die or recover of its wound as

nature may provide. She could not die. She knew that, of course, from the first. Time, she felt, would never erase the scar upon her soul; but the wound itself must heal.

All that—that which was now such a horror in her thought—she had hoped to bury deeper as time passed. She had devoted herself to her brother's needs. She had made his comfort her constant care. Busy mind and busy hands were her salvation from the gnawing regret for that secret happening that she believed must wither all her life.

Now this sudden and unlooked for change had come to shake up all her fragile plans like the shifting of a kaleidoscope. They were going West, toward the land she hated, toward people whom, she told herself, she had every reason to suspect and fear. Why had Ford kept up his correspondence with that Joe Hurley? Betty did not blame her brother for wishing to get away from Ditson Corners. But why need it have been that Westerner who offered the soul-sore minister the refuge that he so gladly accepted?

Betty, without a clear explanation, had no reason to oppose to Hunt's desire for a change that would satisfy him. And such explanation she would have died rather than have given him! She was swept on toward the West, toward whatever fate had in store for her, like a chip upon a current that could not be stemmed.

Aunt Prudence had left her money—conservatively invested—to Betty; but she was not to touch the principal until she was thirty. “If the girl marries before that age, no shiftless man can get it away from her,” had been the spinster’s frank statement in her will. “If she is foolish enough to marry after that age, it is to be hoped she will then have sense at least regarding money matters.” The brother had a small nest egg left from his father’s estate after paying his college and divinity school expenses.

So they were not wholly dependent upon Hunt’s salary. He could afford to take a vacation, and it was on this ground—the need of rest—that he had resigned from the pulpit of Ditson Corners’ First Church. They had left some really good friends behind them in the little Berkshire town—some who truly appreciated the young minister. But the clique against him had shown its activity much too promptly to salve Hunt’s pride. His resignation had been accepted without question, and he had remained only to see Bardell established in his place.

Betty condemned herself that she could not enter whole-heartedly into Hunt’s high expectations of the new field that lay before him. It was adventure—high adventure—to his mind. And why should a parson not long for a bigger life and

broader development as well as another healthy man?

He was going to Canyon Pass without a penny being guaranteed him. Joe Hurley urged him to come; but he told him frankly that there would be opposition. Certain Passonians would not welcome a parson or the establishment of religious worship.

But this opposition was that of the enemy. The Reverend Willett Ford Hunt was not afraid of the devil in an open fight. Opposition in the church itself was what had conquered him at Ditson Corners. Let the phalanxes of wickedness confront him at Canyon Pass, he would stand against them!

Betty saw him coming back down the aisle of the car, smiling broadly, a handsome, muscular figure of a man. He did not look the cleric. She had been so used to seeing him in the black frock-coat and immaculate white collar that she was at first rather shocked when he had donned another suit to travel in.

He was almost boyish looking. He was a big man, and she believed him capable of big things. She could almost wish he had selected some other road in life—although that thought was shocking to her, too. Ford might well have been a business man, an engineer, a banker, a promoter. Betty's ideas were somewhat vague about business life; but she felt sure Ford would have shone in any line. She was a loyal sister.

She shook herself out of the fog of her own thoughts and smiled up at him.

"Met a man in the smoking room who knows that country about Canyon Pass like a book, Bet," Hunt said, dropping down beside her. "It really is a part of the last frontier. We shall always be a pioneer people, we Americans. There is something in the raw places of the earth that intrigues us all—save the saps. And sap, even, hardens in such an environment as this we are bound for."

"I hope you will not be disappointed, Ford."

"Disappointed? Of course I shall be disappointed and heart-sick and soul-weary. But I believe my efforts will not be narrowed and circumscribed and bound down by formalism and caste. As Joe says, I won't be 'throwed and hog-tied.' The old-time revivalists used to urge their converts to 'get liberty.' I'll get liberty out there, I feel sure, in Canyon Pass."

She could say nothing to dash his enthusiasm. It was too late for that now, in any case. Betty even tried to smile. But her face felt as stiff as though it were like to crack in the process.

"All that territory of which Canyon Pass is the heart," pursued Hunt, "has been phenomenally rich in ore in past time. They have to comb the mines and sweep the hydraulic-washed benches very scientifically now to make the game pay. Yet Canyon

Pass is distinctly a mining town and always must be.

"My new acquaintance says it is really 'wild and woolly.'" He smiled more broadly. "I fancy it is all Joe said it is. Crude, rude, roughneck—but honest. If I can dig down to the honest heart of Canyon Pass, Bet, I shall succeed. We'll not worry about first impressions, or the lack of super-civilized conveniences, or the fact that men don't often shave, and the women wear their hair untidily. Of course, I'll make you as comfortable as possible——"

"I can stand whatever you can, Ford," she interrupted with brisk conviction.

"Well," with a sigh of relief, "that's fine. Oh, Bet! This is the life we're going to. I am sure you will be happier when you once get a taste of it."

But she made no reply.

When the two mountain-hogs, drawing and pushing the trans-continental train up the grade, ground to a brief stop at Crescent City, Betty Hunt was surprised to see brick office buildings, street cars, several taxi-cabs at the station, paved streets, and the business bustle of a Western city which always impresses the stranger with the idea that the place is commercially much more important than it actually is.

"This—this cannot be Canyon Pass?" she stammered to Hunt.

"No." He laughed. "But here's Joe Hurley—bless him! Joe!"

He shouted it heartily before dropping off the car step and turning to help Betty. But Joe Hurley strode across the platform and playfully shouldered the minister aside.

"Your servant, Miss Betty!" the Westerner cried, sweeping off his broad-brimmed hat in a not ungraceful bow.

The girl from the East floated off the step into his arms. Joe set her as lightly as a thistle-down upon the platform and somehow found her free hand.

"When Willie, here, told me you would come with him, Miss Betty, I promised the boys at the Great Hope a holiday when you arrived. Great salt-peter!" he added, stepping off to admire her from her rippling, bistered hair to her silk stockinged ankles. "You sure will make the boys sit up and take notice!"

Here Hunt, having relieved himself of the handbags, got hold of Hurley's hand and began pumping. The two young men looked into each other's eyes over that handclasp. They had little to say, but much to feel. Betty sighed as she looked on. Her last hope of quick escape from the West went with that sigh. The handclasp and the look were like

an oath between the two young men to stand by each other.

"Well, old sober-sides!" said Joe.

"Same old Joe, aren't you?" rejoined the minister.

"Come on. We'll get your bags into a taxi and go up to the hotel," Hurley said briskly. "I got rooms for you. We can't go on to the Pass till eight o'clock to-morrow morning."

"Is there but one train a day, Mr. Hurley?" Betty asked as he helped her into the cab.

"To Canyon Pass? Ain't ever been one yet," and he chuckled. "We go over with Lizard Dan and the mail. Some day, when the roads are fixed up, we may get motor service. Until then, a six-mule stagecoach has to serve."

"Oh!"

Hunt's eyes twinkled. "Break it to her gently, Joe," he advised. "Bet is prepared to be very much shocked, I know. This frontier life is going to be an eye-opener for her."

"'Frontier life!'" snorted Hurley. "Why, we're plumb civilized. Bill Judson has laid in a stock of near-silk hosiery and shirts with pleated bosoms. Wait till you see some of the boys in holiday rig. Knock your eye out, when it comes to style."

Betty smiled. She did not mind being laughed at. Besides, the modern appearance of Crescent City had somewhat relieved her apprehension.

Even the hotel was not bad. Their rooms were cheerful and clean, so she could excuse the brand-new, shiny oak furniture and the garrish brass beds.

She did not dislike Joe Hurley—not really. It was only his influence over Ford that she observed with a somewhat jealous eye. Although the mining man seldom addressed her brother seriously, she realized that he was fond of Ford. The latter was much the stronger character of the two—she was sure of that. He would never be overborne in any essential thing by the lighter-minded Hurley. But Ford admired the latter so much that Betty felt her brother was likely to give heed to Hurley's advice in most matters connected with this new and strange environment to which they had come.

"Bet is scared of the West and of you Westerners," Hunt said lightly. "I don't know but what she expected you to have sprouted horns since she saw you before Joe."

"Shucks!" chuckled the other. "We're mostly born with 'em out here, Miss Betty. But they de-horn us before they let us run loose out o' the branding pens. And remember, I spent two years in the effete East."

"It never touched you," and Hunt laughed. "You're just as wild and woolly as ever."

The girl noted that Hurley was thoughtful of their every comfort. He showed them the best of the town that day; but in the evening they rested

at the hotel and talked. The two men conversed while they smoked in Hunt's room, with the door opened into Betty's. She heard the murmur of their voices as she sat by her darkened window and looked out into the electrically lighted main street of Crescent City.

She was not at all thrilled by the novelty of the situation. She was only troubled.

Those strangers passing by! She saw a face in the throng but seldom as the street lights flickered upon it. And always she was fearfully expectant of seeing—What? Whom? She shuddered.

CHAPTER VII

THE FIRST TRICK

THE high-springed stagecoach lurched drunkenly over the trail that wound through a valley Betty thought gnomes might have hewn out when the world was young. Barren, riven rock, gaunt, stunted trees, painted cliffs hazed by distance, all added to a prospect that fell far short in the Eastern girl's opinion of being picturesque.

Rather, it was just what her brother had termed this Western country—raw. Betty did not like any rude thing. She shrank instinctively from anything crude and unfinished.

The three—herself, her brother, and Joe Hurley—occupied the seat on the roof of the plunging coach just behind the driver. "Lizard Dan" was an uncouth individual both in speech and appearance. He was bewhiskered, overalled, wore broken boots and an enormous slouched hat, and his hands were so grimy that Betty shuddered at them, although they so skillfully handled the reins over the backs of six frisky driving-mules.

Lizard Dan, Hurley told the Easterners, had gained his nickname when he was a pocket-hunter in

a now far-distant day. He had been lost in the desert at one time and swore when he came out that he had existed by eating *Crotaphytus Wislizeni* roasted over a fire of dry cacti—the succulence of which saurian is much doubted by the Western white man, although it is a small brother of the South American iguana, there considered a delicacy.

However, Dan acquired a nickname and such a fear of the desert thereby that he became the one known specimen of the completely cured desert rat. He never went prospecting again, but instead drove the stage between Crescent City and Canyon Pass.

"The boys expecting us at the Pass to-day, Dan?" Joe Hurley had asked early in the journey."

"Youbetcha!"

"Got your gun loaded?"

Dan kicked the heavy double-barreled shotgun at his feet and replied again:

"Youbetcha!"

"Do—do wild animals infest the road?" Betty had asked stammeringly.

"Not much," said Hurley. "But Dan carries a heap of registered mail in which wild men, rather than wild animals, might be interested."

"Youbetcha!" agreed Dan.

Hurley glanced sideways at Betty's face, caught its expression, and exploded into laughter.

"You've come to 'Youbetcha Land,' Miss Betty," he said, when he could speak again.

"He is a character," chuckled Hunt on her other side.

The suggestion of highwaymen stuck in the girl's mind. She looked from Lizard Dan's weapon to the ivory butt of the heavy revolver pouched at Joe Hurley's waist. These weapons could not be worn exactly for show—an exhibition of the vanity of rather uncouth minds. It fretted her though without frightening her, this phase of Western life. It was not the possibility of gun-fights and brawls and the offices of Judge Lynch that made Betty Hunt shrink from contact with this country and its people.

The stagecoach mounted out of the valley—which might, Hunt said, have been fittingly described by Ezekiel—and followed a winding trail through the minor range of hills that divided Crescent City and its purlieus from the Canyon Pass country. The coach pitched and rocked as though it was a sea-going hack.

In time they crossed the small divide and came down the watershed into the valley of the East Fork.

Borne to their ears on the breeze at last, through the sound of the rumbling coach-wheels and the rattling trace-chains, was another noise. A throbbing rhythm of sound with the dull swish of intermittent streams of water.

"The hydraulic pumps at the Eureka Washings,"

explained Hurley. "We'll be in sight of them—and of Canyon Pass—before very long."

The stagecoach lurched around a corner, and the raw, red bench of the riverbank came into view. Steam pumps were noisily at work and men were busy at the sluices into which the gold-bearing earth and gravel were washed down from the high bank.

Three great, brass-nozzled hydraulic "guns" were at work—each machine straddled by a man in oil-skins and hip boots, who manipulated the heavy stream of water that ate into the bank and crumbled it in sections.

At the moment of their sighting the hydraulic washings across the river, there was raised a wild, concerted shout from a point ahead. Out of a hidden cove galloped a cavalcade of a dozen or more mounted men, who swept up the road to meet the coach.

For an instant Betty thought of the shotgun at Dan's feet and of highwaymen. These coming riders waved guns and yelled like wild Indians. But she saw a broad grin on Joe Hurley's face.

"Here come some of the Great Hope boys," he explained. "Their idea of 'welcome to our city' may be a little noisy, but they mean you well, Hunt."

They came "a-shootin'," and Lizard Dan threw the long lash of his whip over the backs of his six mules to force them through the cavalcade on the gallop.

Firing their guns and yelling the riders on their wiry ponies, surrounding the coach as its escort, pounded down to the ford. Their hullabaloo announced far in advance the approach of the coach to Canyon Pass.

In all its ugliness the mining camp was revealed. The gaze of the Easterners was focused on its unpainted shacks and rutted streets. They saw men, women, children, and a multitude of dogs running from all points toward the main thoroughfare of the town.

It was like a picture—not like anything real. Betty's dazed mind could not accept this nightmare of a place as actually being the town to which fate—and her brother's obstinacy—had brought them. Given an opportunity right then, the girl would have failed her brother! She was in a mood to desert him and return East as fast as she could travel.

Joe Hurley grinned at her. She had begun almost to hate those twinkling brown eyes of his with the golden sparks in them. He seemed to know just what her feelings were and to enjoy her horror of the crudity which assailed her on every hand. To her mind, Hurley was worse than his associates, for he had enjoyed the advantages of some culture.

The mules dashed into the shallows. Spray flew as high as the roof of the coach. The mules settled

into a heavier pace as they dragged the vehicle up the farther bank and into the foot of Main Street.

The crowd—a couple of hundred people of all ages—had gathered before the Wild Rose Hotel. This stood opposite the bank and farther along the street than the Three Star Grocery and Boss Tolley's Grub Stake. The mules picked up their heels again under the cracking of Lizard Dan's whip-lash, and cantered up to the chief hostelry of Canyon Pass. The yelling crew of horsemen—a bizarre committee of welcome indeed—rode ahead, punctuating their vociferous clamor by an occasional pistol-shot.

Betty caught sight of her brother's face. It was as broadly smiling as was that of Joe Hurley! Actually Ford was enjoying this awful experience.

The moment Dan drew the mules to a halt, Hurley was half way to the ground and turned on the step to help Betty down. She glanced timidly at Hunt again. He was preparing to descend on the other side of the coach, leaving her entirely to Hurley's care.

Then occurred that incident which would ever be engraved upon Betty's memory, and which marked indeed the coming of the Reverend Willett Ford Hunt to Canyon Pass on the archives of the town's history in letters that never would be effaced.

As Hunt started to descend from the roof of the coach there sounded a single pistol-shot and the hat

he wore—a low-crowned affair, the single mark of the cleric in his dress—sailed into the air with a ragged hole through brim and crown.

As the hat flew upward a fusillade of five more shots followed the first, and the hat was torn to rags as it sailed over the roof of the coach. The crowd roared—some in anger, but most in derision. The man standing by the door of the Grub Stake reloaded his gun before putting it away, grinning broadly.

Hunt was startled; but his own smile did not fade. What was it Joe had impressed so emphatically upon his mind?

“It’s the first impression that counts with Canyon Pass folks. Give ’em the chance, and they’ll laugh you out of town. And remember, they are bound to judge you, Hunt, by their own standards.”

The young minister felt that the occasion was momentous. His usefulness here in Canyon Pass might depend upon his action or comment in this emergency.

His nerves were perfectly steady. How was his *nerve*? He knew the man who had shot the hat from his head was such a good shot that he had been in no danger at all.

But Hunt felt that something more was expected of him than the mere ignoring of a rude and offensive act. He started across the road toward the gunman. Those who stood in the way opened a lane

for him with some alacrity. The smiles upon the faces of those who moved stiffened. Something extraordinary, something they had not at all expected, was about to happen.

Hicks, slouching against the front of the Grub Stake, came to sudden attention. His fingers crooked, creeping toward the butt of his gun again. Every atom of the ruffian's courage—such as it was—lay in that weapon. Without it—and its leaden death—he was a sheep for bravery!

Smiling still Hunt reached him. The parson's steady gaze held that of Hicks as the human eye is said to hypnotize the gaze of all wild beasts. Hicks, however, was not wild. Not now. Not so you could notice it!

"Brother," Hunt said cheerfully, "you've spoiled my hat. It's the only hat I've got with me until my trunks come in by freight. You've had your fun, and it's only fair you should pay for it."

The expression of Hicks' face sunk into a sneer. He thought the white-livered parson was trying to get money from him for the hat. He must indeed be a "softie."

Then Hunt's hands moved suddenly, swiftly. In a flash he had snatched the broad-brimmed hat from Hicks' head and placed it on his own.

"Turn about is fair play, don't you think?" said the parson, and without waiting for a reply he turned on his heel and went back across the street!

The silence that had fallen on the crowd had been of that tense, strained quality that portended tragedy. Had Hunt showed offense at the trick played upon him and struck Hicks, the latter would have used his gun without mercy. And scarcely could a jury have been impaneled in Canyon Pass that would have convicted the ruffian.

But of a sudden, a roar of laughter rose from the crowd. They rocked with it, beating their knees, holding their sides, laughing with wide-open mouths and streaming eyes. Nor was the comical appearance of Hicks' dilapidated hat crowning the parson's otherwise impeccable outfit all that spurred Canyon Pass to such wild cachinnation.

The strident laughter was aimed at the chagrined gunman. Hicks knew it. The broad back of the parson offered a sure target; but he knew better than to draw his gun a second time. Instead he turned away, hatless, and sought sanctuary in the Grub Stake.

Hunt had taken the first trick in this game he had "set into." And Canyon Pass to a man admired a shrewd gambler.

CHAPTER VIII

A FLOWER IN THE MIRE

HAD Betty Hunt not had Joe Hurley to steady her as she came down from the roof of the stagecoach to the ground in the midst of the crowd, she never could have stood upright through that scene! The sight of her brother's hat flying overhead, the target of Hicks' six-gun, led her to believe that Hunt was in peril—deadly peril.

She wanted to beg Hurley to run to her brother's rescue, but her tongue clove to the roof of her mouth. What followed utterly appalled her. She verily believed that Hunt took his life in his hands when he approached and browbeat the bad man!

But as she heard the boisterous laughter of the crowd and saw the strange hat flapping about the Reverend Willett Ford Hunt's ears, Betty became suddenly angry.

"Take off that horrid hat, Ford!" she cried when the parson joined them. "I beg of you, take it off at once."

"Don't do it, Willie," interposed Hurley. "Let it be. No crown of glory you may earn will ever so become you. Continue to wear it, Reverend, and

not a soul in Canyon Pass will ever laugh at *you*, if they do at the hat. It will remind 'em that you're an honest-to-goodness he-man."

Hunt smiled deprecatingly. "You make too much of it, Joe. Don't worry, Betty, about the hat. I might as well keep the joke up a little while."

"'Joke!' " she groaned.

Hurley slapped Hunt resoundingly on the shoulder. "You're all right, Willie!"

This turned Betty against him all the more. It was so uncouth she thought on Hurley's part and so undignified on her brother's. With all these people looking on, grinning and gaping, was that the way to gain respect for a clergyman and for his work?

"Well, let's go into the Wild Rose and get you settled," Hurley said with that cordiality that did much, after all, to disarm Betty's criticism. "I told 'Cholo' Sam and Maria to clean up some rooms for you and try and make things halfway decent. But I don't know. This isn't like the hotel at Crescent City."

The statement was not conducive to Betty's peace of mind. The sordidness and squalor of Canyon Pass was being from moment to moment etched more deeply on her brain. They mounted the steps of unplanned boards and crossed the porch that shook even under Betty's light tread. Unpainted walls, uncarpeted stairs, and not altogether clean floors met her gaze as they entered the hostelry.

If Hunt was appalled by the rudeness of their surroundings he very successfully hid his real feelings. He had spent vacations in the hunting and fishing camps of Maine and Quebec. The lack of even the ordinary conveniences of civilized life could not in any case trouble him as it did his gently nurtured sister.

He did, however, on this first evening arrange to have their supper served in Betty's room, rather than forcing her to eat in the general dining-room of the hotel. But he explained that they could not thus segregate themselves in the future.

"It wouldn't do, Betty. I must mix with these people—show myself willing to be one of them in ordinary ways. Respect for the cloth cannot be won among these open-hearted folk by finnickiness. I must be one of them. I must show them that I am a man as well as a preacher."

She could not agree; but at least she was wise enough not to oppose—at this time—his evident acceptance of Joe Hurley's advice. She saw in the latter more clearly than ever a dangerous ally for her brother.

Hunt's abundant cheerfulness—even over the coarse supper-fare and the absence of napkins—closed his sister's lips even more firmly. The two had come to Canyon Pass with diametrically opposed mental attitudes. Hunt was prepared to accept things as they should find them, but nothing in

Canyon Pass, or about it or its inhabitants, could please Betty.

As darkness fell the town grew noisier, for it was a Saturday night. Betty, looking from her window, saw only flaring oil lamps and gasoline torches illuminating the street. The men who passed up and down were much rougher in appearance and of tongue than those she had watched under similar circumstances in Crescent City. There were almost no women in sight.

Men spoke harshly, or shouted ribaldries to one another. Indeed, the girl from the East scarcely understood the language they used. Miserably she crept to bed. She had locked her door after her brother left her, and she even dragged the pine washstand against it as a barricade.

The Wild Rose Hotel itself was no quiet abode on this night. There was a bar, and although it was at the other end of the house, the noise of the shouting, the rude songs, the stamping and quarreling therein made Betty shake in her bed until long after midnight. She had no idea that her brother went to bed, fell asleep in a minute, and slept as peacefully as a baby until almost sunrise.

A Sabbath dawn could be as calm at Canyon Pass as at Ditson Corners. The pearl-gray light of the new day washed the sleep from the Reverend Willett Ford Hunt's eyes. He arose to lean on his elbow and gaze through a window that, curtainless,

looked out on Mulligan Lane. There were some frowsy buildings within sight—evidently dwellings of a kind—but the parson lifted his eyes to the hills feeling with the psalmist that “whence cometh my strength.”

They stood—those hills—in serrated ranks from the far east to the point where the sudden uplift of the canyon wall on that side of the river closed the outlook. Even Old Graylock of his familiar Berkshires had not the magnificence of these peaks. He was impressed again as he already had been with the difference merely in size between these western hills and the Berkshires, let alone the vast dissimilarity in their contour.

The eminences of western Massachusetts for the most part slope away into wooded and pastured ridges, which themselves melt into the lush lowlands. Their crowns do not seem so imposing as these western peaks because of their configuration.

His window was open. Suddenly he became aware of voices below it at the back of the hotel.

Something was going on there—something that revealed the dregs of life to be as mean and offensive here in Canyon Pass as they could be in any place in the whole world. He heard the maundering tones of an intoxicated man and—sharply contrasted—the voice of a woman.

“Get up, Sam, and come home.”

"Hic! Won't go home till mawnin'—till mawnin'—hic—doth 'pear."

"Well, morning's appearing all right, and it'll catch you here, wallerin' like a hog in the lane. Come home with me."

"No. I'm a man. I'm—hic!—independent, I am. I'll go hu-hu-home jest whenever I please."

"Now's the time to please me, Sam. Get up and come along."

"Couldn't do it, gal. Couldn't think—hic!—of it. 'Twould be givin' up my indepen—dic!—dence. I'm—I'm my own master. Leastways, I am on Sunday when the mine's shut down. Here I stand——"

"But you don't stand!" ejaculated the woman's voice sharply. "And I don't believe you can."

The inebriated man gave no heed to this challenge. "Here I stand," he repeated. "'On Jordan's bank I take my stand, and cast a—hic!—cast a wishtful eye'——"

"More'n likely you'll cast a shoe and won't get home at all, if I can't start you," complained the woman's voice.

Hunt had risen and was scrambling into the more necessary articles of his apparel. He went to the window and looked down into the lane.

There was an overturned box just below the window and slouched down upon it was a withered, baldheaded man whose frayed whiskers and untrimmed hair made him look a deal like an inebriated

monkey. There was nothing humorous looking in this specimen of fallen humanity to the mind of the parson. He could only pity his case.

But it must be confessed the other person engaged in the colloquy gained Hunt's interest and held it at once.

She was small, lissome, of a vigorous figure and vastly more attractive to his eye than any girl he had ever looked at. Indeed, he was amazed to see such a really beautiful creature in such squalid surroundings.

"Get up and come home with me," said the girl again. "What will Mother Tubbs say when she sees you?"

"Heh? I reckon I better stay yere," was the reply. "Man can't keep his—hic!—dignity when a great walrus of a woman throws him 'round like he was a sack of spuds. I tell you, gal, I made a great mistake in marryin' that woman."

"It was a great mistake for her—that's a fact," was the sharp rejoinder. "You got so many failings I don't see how Mother Tubbs remembers 'em all when she prays for you. Ugh! You men! There ain't a one of you I'd give a hoot in a rain-water barrel for. Get up!"

The girl again tried to drag him to his feet. Sam Tubbs merely fell over sideways and sprawled helpless upon the ground.

Hunt, without his coat or vest, but grabbing up

the flap-brimmed hat he had secured from the gunman the evening before, opened his door, ran down the back stairway of the hotel, and made his way quickly into the lane. As he appeared before Nell Blossom, standing over the now slumbering drunkard, he looked anything but the cleric.

"Can I be of help?" he asked.

"You can't help me none, mister," replied Nell brusquely.

"I scarcely think you need help," said Hunt, smiling. "But this unfortunate——"

"'Unfortunate' is right!" repeated the girl. "Sam Tubbs is so unfortunate that it would be money right now in his pocket if he'd never been born. If I leave him here some of those cheap hangers-on of the Grub Stake or Colorado's place will roll him for all he has in his jeans. And Mother Tubbs needs what he's got left of his pay—believe me!"

"Where does he live?"

"Where I do. Down the lane a ways."

"I think we can get him there," said Hunt, and without further ado he stooped, got a grip on Sam Tubbs, and proceeded to throw him over his shoulder like a sack of meal.

The girl's eyes grew round. For the first time she expressed some appreciation—perhaps a little admiration—for his friendliness.

"You wasn't behind the door when they were

passing out muscle," she remarked. "Well, come on. I'll show you the way."

The now slumbering Sam Tubbs was scarcely a heavy burden, and to Hunt the task of carrying him was slight. He was considerably amused as well as interested in the girl. It was quite apparent that she did not know he was the new parson. Evidently she had not been in the crowd the day before that had welcomed the coming of the tenderfoot preacher and his sister to Canyon Pass.

Hunt was studying her face now with more than amusement, although her bluff manner of speech and utterly independent air made Nell Blossom a revelation of a new phase of femininity to him. Her speech, in the first place, did not accord with her beauty, nor, indeed, with the natural refinement expressed in her countenance.

She certainly was a lovely girl! In the early morning light her light brown hair seemed threaded all through the mass of it with strands of gold. Her eyes were the blue of a mountain lake—but with ice in their depths. Their gaze, as it was turned on Hunt, was utterly impersonal.

Her peachy complexion as well, offset by dark brows and red lips, aroused Hunt's admiration for its sheer beauty. Brown-gold hair, blue eyes, petite and lissome figure—when had such description of a girl caught in the cogs of his memory? Some-

where lately he had seen, or heard described, such a sprite of a girl as this.

She was dressed plainly enough in serviceable corduroy—short skirt, blouse, broad-brimmed hat, high laced boots. A crimson scarf was knotted under the collar of her blouse. She wore no ornament.

Nell did not say much during that brief walk. Not that she was at all timid or bashful; but she seemed to feel no particular interest in this young man who had put himself out to help Sam Tubbs.

For her own part she considered Sam a nuisance. She had no use for the old reprobate. It was solely for Mother Tubbs' sake that she had bothered herself with regard to Sam. Finding him drunk—as usual—on her way home from Colorado Brown's place early on this Sunday morning, she had tried to get him home without realizing at first that Sam was quite so far gone in liquor as he was.

As for this man who walked by her side, carrying so easily the insensible Sam, Nell did not question who he was. That he was a stranger—possibly a traveling salesman, or “drummer”—perhaps a mining man, she believed, if she thought of him at all. As Hunt suspected, she did not for a moment identify him as the parson Joe Hurley had brought to Canyon Pass. In any event she could not have imagined the Reverend Willett Ford Hunt as this sort of person.

They turned abruptly into another narrow alley and came to the front of the Tubbs' shack. The yard, fenced by pickets of barrel-staves, was neatly kept and there was an attempt at a flower bed on either side of the walk. Mother Tubbs usually punished Sam for his sin of drunkenness, after he had slept off his potations, by making him weed the tiny gardens and rake the path. These penitential activities kept the Tubbs premises spick and span.

Nell led the way imperturbably around to the back door of the shack. This door was open and a thin blue haze—odorous and appetizing—floated out of the kitchen.

"Just getting a nice breakfast for you, honey," said Mother Tubbs, filling the doorway and seeing Nell first of all. "Now, if only Sam would come along—Is *that* Sam? He ain't dead, is he?"

"Only dead drunk," said Nell in scorn.

"Where shall I put him?" asked Hunt quietly.

"Well, I reckon it don't much matter. You can drop him down anywhere, mister. I'll fetch a dishpan o' water and sluice him down when I get a chance. But I can't let them cakes sp'ile." Then she saw and recognized the parson's face, for Mother Tubbs had been at the Wild Rose Hotel the day before when the stagecoach had arrived. "Goodness me! I declared, Mister—er—Brother Hunt, this is good of ye."

Nell stared. The note of respect in Mother

Tubbs' voice revealed in a flash Hunt's identity to the cabaret singer.

"I am sartain sure obliged to you," went on the old woman. "Nell Blossom never could have got him home alone." Hunt had lowered her husband to a seat on the porch floor and propped his back against a post. "Sleeping like a baby, ain't he? Well, he can stay thataway till after Nell has her breakfast."

Hunt was not giving her his attention. The name "Nell Blossom" had revealed to him instantly the familiarity of the girl's description. This was the golden-haired, blue-eyed, high-spirited beauty Joe Hurley had written about—the girl who could really sing.

They stared at each other while the old woman went back to her cakes. Nell was obviously shifting the gears of her opinion about this stranger. He, a parson? No longer, this husky six-footer!

"Mebbe you ain't acquainted," Mother Tubbs said, bustling back from the stove. "Nell Blossom is a-living with me and has been doing so—off and on—for more than three years. Ever since her pa, old Henery Blossom, up and died. She's a singer, Nell is—the sweetest you ever heard, Brother Hunt. I'm hoping, when you get to holding meetings, that we can get her to sing in the choir."

Hunt bowed, smiling, to the girl. Her expression

of countenance was no less forbidding than before. She offered him no encouragement.

"Won't you stop for breakfast with me and Nell, Brother Hunt?" went on the hospitable old woman. "I always try to have something hot and tasty for Nell when she comes home after her night's work."

Nell started—was it angrily? She opened her lips to speak, then shut them in a straight, red line. In any case, Hunt caught the significance of her attitude of objection, had he been tempted to accept the old woman's hearty invitation.

"Not this morning, Mrs.—er—Tubbs, is it? Sister Tubbs? I am glad to have met you." He met her huge hand with a warm clasp of his own. "When we get started here, I am sure I can depend on your aid and good wishes?"

"Youbetcha!" exclaimed the old woman. "And you'll see me in one of the front seats—mebbe in two of 'em if they ain't bigger than usual," she added with twinkling eyes.

He laughed boyishly, lifting the dilapidated old hat to both Mother Tubbs and the girl as he turned the corner of the shack. The old woman looked down admonishingly at Nell Blossom.

"You weren't a mite perlite to the minister, Nell," she complained.

CHAPTER IX

A BEGINNING

THAT eastern mountain range was all etched with rose color now as Hunt went back to the hotel. But the town had scarcely quieted after its night's revelry. Inebriates were still dribbling along the streets from the all-night places.

He thought of Nell Blossom. She certainly was a flower in the mire of Canyon Pass. Joe Hurley had written none too enthusiastically about the girl, as far as concerned her beauty. And although Hunt was by no means given to impulsive judgments, he knew there was a refined atmosphere about the girl despite her gruff independence of manner and speech.

His return to the hotel was unheralded save by the cheerful grin of Cholo Sam, the Mexican proprietor of the hostelry, who was sluicing out the barroom.

"Some morning, thees, Señor Hunt." He flashed a tentative, toothful smile toward the array of bottles behind his bar. "Weel you have one leetle drink, Señor? A 'pick-my-up,' you call eet, eh?"

"Coffee, Sam," replied Hunt briskly, acknowledg-

ing the offer in the spirit it was meant. "Coffee only—and perhaps a bit of bread with it. Service for two, please. My sister will want some. Will you bring it up?"

"But surely, señor." He hesitated. "Ees eet the truth that the señor ees a meenister—the padre? Si?"

"Quite true, Sam. That is my business—my trade. And I have come here to Canyon Pass hoping to exercise it."

Hunt mounted to his room to find that Betty was already astir. She had been into his room during his absence. One of the bags he had brought upon the stagecoach had been opened and across the foot of the bed was carefully laid his ordinary Sunday garments—frock-coat, high-cut waistcoat, and narrow trousers of dead black sheen.

With the outer garments was the stiff-bosomed white shirt—"boiled" Joe Hurley would have designated its variety—the silk socks, with a pair of low, gun-metal kid shoes set primly on the floor under the edge of the bed.

Ford Hunt looked at all these once—then again. He thought of what he had been doing already on this Sunday morning. Then he burst into loud laughter.

Sunday afternoon when the weather was propitious was the time for social intercourse in Canyon Pass. Those who had worked or played or had

been intoxicated the night before had slept off the effects of their super-exertions for the most part. They came forth now shaved and in clean garments and strolled to Main Street.

It was still too early for the cabarets and gambling places to be open, and even the saloon bars were somnolent save for the flies buzzing about them or drunkenly crawling in the spilled beer. The pivotal point of the town's rendezvous and gossip on Sunday afternoon was the Three Star Grocery. In front of that old Bill Judson held forth between his exertions of waiting on such customers as might claim his attention.

"Dad burn it!" ejaculated Judson. "I bet Tom Hicks has crawled into his hole and pulled the hole in after him. I should want to if I was him. And you take it from me, boys, a parson that can do that to a bad actor like Tom Hicks will make Canyon Pass sit up and take notice before he's through."

"It showed sand, I allow," agreed one of his hearers judiciously. "But it's r'iled Boss Tolley all up and he swears the parson sha'n't stay."

"You don't say!" drawled Judson sarcastically. "And who ever elected Tolley to be boss of the Pass? If for no other reason, I'm strong for this yere Reverend Hunt."

"As a man—a reg'lar he-man—I'm for him, too," agreed another. "But I'm thinkin' we can get along

yere at Canyon Pass without much psalm-singing and preaching."

"Yeppy. You're right," declared a third of Judson's hearers.

"Let alone that you're all wrong," put in Judson again with energy, "let's look at the thing in a practical way, as the feller said. If a man come in yere and opened a shoe shop or a candy pop or wanted to sell shoestrings, we'd give him the glad hand, wouldn't we? 'Live and let live,' has always been the motto of Canyon Pass, ain't it?"

"What's that got to do with it, Bill?"

"Why, you big gump! Ain't this parson got something to peddle? His stock in trade is religion, and he's got just as much right to show goods and try to drum up trade as the next one, ain't he? He's entitled to a fair deal. And Boss Tolley, Tom Hicks, and them other highbinders can sulk in their dens and suck their paws. I ain't never gone ironed since I opened this shack, nigh thirty years ago. But I'll sling a gun on my hip and act as body-guard if it's necessary for any feller that ain't getting a fair deal in this town. That's gospel!"

"I never knowed ye was so all-fired religious, Bill," complained one of his surprised hearers.

"Religious!" retorted the storekeeper. "It ain't that I'm religious—not so's you'd notice it. But I got a sense of fair play,—dad burn it! Here comes the parson now, boys."

Hunt and Joe Hurley came out of the Wild Rose Hotel. The minister had not donned his clerical garments. He was dressed as he had been the day before when he arrived on the stagecoach, except for the hat he wore. That flopping-brimmed head-gear which he had taken from Tom Hicks crowned the parson's brush of crisp, dark hair.

"Boys," said Hurley, when they came near, "meet Willie Hunt. He's one of the best old scouts I met when I was East, that time I stood that college on its head, like I told you. I reckon you know Willie is a real man, if he is a parson. Mr. Hunt, meet Jib Collins, Cale Mack, Jim Tierney, and—last but not least—Bill Judson, who is the honored mentor of this camp."

"Whatever that is," and the storekeeper grinned, shaking hands in turn with Hunt. "This yere Joe Hurley slings language at times that sartainly stops traffic. He can't seem to get over it. It was wished on him when he lived East that time he is always telling us about."

Hunt knew how to meet these men—he was by nature a "good mixer." There is much in the grasp of a hand, a steady look, an unafraid smile, that recommends the stranger to such bold spirits. The timid, even the hesitant, make no progress with them.

"Parson," pursued Judson, "we was just discussin' your business as you and Joe come along. In

my opinion we need you yere at Canyon Pass. I'm speakin' for myself alone," and he glared at the other men in the group accusingly; "but I can't put it too strong. We need ye. To my mind religion is a mighty good thing. We're loose livin', we're loose talkin', and we need to be jacked up right smart.

"You can count on me, parson, to back any play you make, clean across the board. I'm for you, strong. We need meetin's started. We ought to have a Sunday school for the young 'uns. We need to be preached at and prayed with. I come of right strict Presbyterian stock, and when I was a lad I was used to all the means of grace, I was."

"You are interested, then, Mr. Judson, in any attempt we may make to inaugurate services here on Sunday?" Hunt asked cheerfully.

"Youbetcha!" was the hearty rejoinder.

"Of course, Mr. Judson," Hunt pursued, "you understand that, to have successful and helpful services, some of us at least must have the spirit of service?"

"Sure. That's what I tell 'em."

"I take it from brief observation that this day—the Sabbath—is observed very little at present in Canyon Pass?"

"True as true," said the storekeeper.

"To get people really interested in divine services on this day, don't you think we should begin by making some difference—a real difference—be-

tween the First Day and the other six?" Hunt continued, eyeing Judson reflectively. "If we who are interested in the betterment of the community are not willing to lead in this matter, those we wish to help can scarcely follow.

"Sunday should not be like the other six days of the week. Your mines and gold washings shut down on this day. How about other secular activities ceasing—as far as it may be possible?"

"I—I reckon you're right, parson," Judson said, though with some hesitation. "Of course, the boys have been used to having their freedom on Sundays, and their fun. I don't believe you could go far in shutting down the saloons and gambling tables—not right at first."

"But would you go as far as you could personally to establish a better standard of Sunday observance?" pursued Hunt.

"Heh?" ejaculated the puzzled Judson.

Hunt, still smiling, mounted the steps of the store, closed the door, and turned the great key which had been left in the outside of the lock. He removed the key and handed it to Bill Judson as he came down the steps again.

"Mr. Judson," he said in a perfectly unmoved voice, "if you will begin by keeping that door locked on Sundays you will be leading the way in this community toward a proper observance of the Lord's Day."

Joe Hurley was on the point of bursting out laughing. But he thought better of joining Collins, Mack, and Tierney in wild expressions of joy at the old man's discomfiture.

Judson's face turned from its usual weather-beaten tan to a purple-red. His rheumy eyes sparked. Then slowly, reflectively, a grin wreathed his tobacco-stained lips and crinkled the outer corners of his eyelids.

"Parson," he said, thrusting out his hand again, "you're on! I'll show these fellers I'm a good sport. Nobody was ever able to say honestly that Bill Judson took water; and I won't give 'em the chance't to say it now."

CHAPTER X

MUTTERINGS OF A STORM

It was Joe Hurley who saw Betty appear on the porch of the hotel. Perhaps his gaze had been fixed in that direction for that very purpose. It was a vision to draw the eyes of any man hungry for a picture of a well-dressed and modest young woman. Betty Hunt was like nothing that had ever before stepped out upon the Main Street of Canyon Pass.

"Come on, Willie," urged Hurley, seizing the minister's sleeve. "You've jarred Judson clean to bedrock. Spare him any more for now. Come on. Your sister is waiting for us to take her to the Great Hope."

Betty was not gaily appareled. Her frock was black and white, and so was her hat. She still remembered Aunt Prudence's death—and that she was a parson's sister! But it was the way the frock was made, and how it and the hat became her that marked Betty as an object of approval, to the male Passonians at least.

"Such a beautiful day, Mr. Hurley," Betty ventured. "One might think it a respectable country town if only one could forget last night."

She stared at Hurley with accusation. He dropped his head sheepishly. Somehow Betty Hunt put the matter as though it were his fault!

"We're going to change all that in time," said Hunt cheerfully. "These people are not so bad, Betty——"

"That they couldn't be worse? Yes, I know," retorted his sister.

"Why, Betty!" murmured Hunt, "isn't that a bit uncharitable?"

"I have no thought for charity in a place like this," declared the girl. "Such dirt, vileness and disorder I never dreamed of! These people are not even human! I cannot excuse them. No branch of the human family could possibly be ignorant enough for us to excuse what I have already seen about me in Canyon Pass."

"Great saltpeter!" murmured Hurley.

"You did not tell my brother the half of it!" she cried, flaring at the mining man. "You hid the worst. You only said things in your letters that you knew would attract him here."

Joe Hurley started back a step. If a kitten he had stooped to pet had suddenly turned and gouged him with its claws he could have been no more startled.

But Betty Hunt proved herself no kitten. She was usually a very self-contained and quite unex-

cited young woman. It was only for a minute that she allowed her anger to flame out.

"Now, that's enough about that," she pursued, still with a frown. "The thing is done. We are here. I do not believe that Ford will ever be happy in Canyon Pass; and I know I shall not."

"Better not speak so positively, Bet," said Hunt coolly. A brother seldom is much impressed by his sister's little ruffles of temper. "You may have to change your opinion. My belief is that none of us can find happiness in a new environment. We must take the happiness with us to any new abode."

Hurley was much subdued during their walk through the town. His knowledge of girls like Betty was very slight. He had never had a sister and he could not remember his mother.

Even girls like Nell Blossom had not been frequent events in the mining man's life. His two years spent in the East had been almost as barren of feminine society as his years in the West.

Now, it must be confessed, Betty Hunt had "got him going," to quote his own thought in the matter. Not that Hurley was of a fickle temperament. But he was not a man to eat his heart out in an utterly impossible cause.

Nell had shown him plainly that she had no use for him save as an acquaintance. He could not even count himself her friend now, for since her

return from Hoskins she had seemed more remote from the men of Canyon Pass than ever before.

So, Joe Hurley had already put Nell out of his mind in that way before Betty Hunt had appeared on the scene. And, it seemed, he was fated to be attracted by a distant star. The minister's sister was distinctly of another world—and a world far, far above that of Canyon Pass, Hurley told himself.

It was not Betty's finnickiness, as her brother bluntly called them, that held the girl from the East so dear in Joe's eyes. It was in spite of her disapproval of Canyon Pass and all that lay therein. The mining man was deeply interested in the development of the camp. He had done much in a business way to improve conditions here. He hoped to do more.

He had quite realized that the place needed something besides modern business methods to raise it out of the slough in which it wallowed as a community. This realization, shared with such people as Bill Judson and old Mother Tubbs, had led Hurley to interest the Reverend Willett Ford Hunt in Canyon Pass. He foresaw the camp in time as well governed a place as Crescent City.

Betty's scorn and vituperation regarding the shortcomings of the Pass actually pained Hurley. Was it so bad as she seemed to think it was? This girl from the East was very positive in her dislike for the place and its people.

Then he looked over her head at the quietly smiling face of Hunt. He did not seem to share his sister's opinion that the Pass was beyond redemption. There was, after all, a quality of sanity and stability about Hunt that bolstered Hurley's hope.

"That boy is all right," thought Hurley finally. "He sees things with a clear eye. And our crudeness doesn't scare him. His sister—— Well! what could you expect of a pretty, fluffy little thing like her? This place is bound to look rotten to her at the first. But at that, she may change her opinion."

In fact, Joe Hurley had determination enough to believe that he was just the chap who could change these opinions of Betty Hunt! His non-success with Nell Blossom had not convinced him that he would never be able to attract other girls.

Right at the start Joe had been enamored of the fragile beauty of the parson's sister. Hers was not the robust, if petite, prettiness of Nell Blossom. It was a beauty of spirit and character that looked out of Betty's gray eyes. Her very calmness and primness intrigued the mining man.

Opposite is attracted by opposite. Because he was so open and hearty himself, Hurley admired the daintiness and delicacy of Betty. Her primness, even her shrinking from the things to which he was so used in and about Canyon Pass, pleased the young man in a way.

Here was just the sort of girl he desired to es-

tablish in his home—a real home—when he got one. Joe Hurley did not propose to live in a bachelor shack in the purlieus of Canyon Pass all his life—by no means! He was getting on. The Great Hope was panning out well. It had every promise of being a big thing in time. He was going to be rich. Betty Hunt would grace the head of the table of a millionaire—wear the clothes a prince might buy for his wife—hold the respect and admiration that the highest lady in the land might claim.

“I’ve got to have that girl,” thought Hurley. “And I’m going after her!”

They climbed the steep road of rolled rock to the highland overlooking the town and giving them a view to the first turn of the canyon bed of Runaway River. When the squalid sight of Canyon Pass could be shut out of the mind, even Betty admitted that the dimming light in the canyon lent a fairylike charm to all its ruggedness. It was a slot made by giants in the hills without doubt. She expressed a desire to see more of it.

“I’ll get you a good cayuse,” said Hurley eagerly. “Got any riding duds with you?”

“I have my habit in one of my trunks.”

The Westerner looked at her doubtfully. “Don’t know about long skirts flapping around the legs of these Western critters——”

“Habits are not made with skirts nowadays, Mr. Hurley,” Betty interrupted coldly. “Fashion—

even in the Fenway—demands that the feminine riding suit shall be mannish.”

“Oh! If you ride astraddle,” replied Hurley, without realizing that his phrase shocked her, “we can find you a horse that will fill the bill. I’ve got one that I ride myself, and I can pick up one for Willie.”

“Most agreeable to me, I’m sure,” agreed the parson. “I can ride after a fashion. Bet got her training at boarding school. If Aunt Prudence knew all her niece got at that institution the dear old lady would have been shocked.”

Betty did not smile. There were things that had happened to her at boarding school that Ford knew nothing about. His words aroused in her mind the carking memory of the secret that had changed Betty Hunt’s life completely—the secret that had killed all the sparkle and winsome lightness in the girl’s nature. She became silent and after that only listened to the talk of the two young men.

Not that she was not interested as they went on and Hurley pointed out the several claims being worked with the most modern methods of the Oreode Company, and the Nufall Syndicate, and by himself and his associates at the Great Hope. This mining business was all new to the girl, and she had an inquiring mind. She did not shrink at all, when Hurley suggested a descent into the shaft and pro-

duced slickers and rubber boots and tarpaulins to put on over their clothes.

The man in charge let them down in the bucket, and a gasoline torch showed them all that there was to see under the surface. Hurley explained with pride how he had found and developed the first paying lead in the Great Hope, but that the name of the mine foreshadowed a much richer vein that he was confident was soon to be opened. Science and that "sixth sense" of the miner assured him that the big thing was coming.

"We're always looking toward El Dorado, we miners," he said with a laugh. "It's hope that keeps us up."

"'El Dorado'—the hoped-for land," repeated Betty softly. And then, standing there in the flickering radiance of the torch, she repeated, while the men were silent, that concluding paragraph of Robert Louis Stevenson's essay:

"'O toiling hands of mortals! O unwearied feet, traveling ye know not whither! Soon, soon it seems to you, you must come forth on some conspicuous hilltop and, but a little way further, against the setting sun, descry the spires of El Dorado. Little do ye know your own blessedness, for to travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive, and the true success is to labor.'"

"Amen," Hunt commented seriously.

"You said it," agreed the mining man with that bluff emphasis that did not shock Betty so much now as it might at the beginning. "That's what keeps me going. Stevenson knew what he was writing about. But, we would have considered him a weakling out here, I am afraid. We are inclined to judge everything here in terms of muscle and brawn."

"But it has been your brains, Joe, not your brawn, that has carried you so far in this work," Hunt declared warmly.

Hurley sighed as they went back to the shaft. "Let me tell you I have had to use considerable brawn, Willie, in handling these roughnecks that work for me."

He laughed again. Joe Hurley could not be sober for long. And his temper exploded when he had to shout at the top of his lungs to attract the attention of the watchmen when they wanted to get up to the surface.

"This feller isn't worth the powder to blow him from here to Jericho," grumbled Hurley. "I always miss old Steve Siebert when he slopes for the desert, as he's bound to do every spring. That old desert rat is always here over Sunday to see that everything is all right, when he's on the job. But he just has to go off prospecting once in so often."

He told them more about Siebert and Andy Mc-

Cann as they went away from the claim. Betty listened as before with quiet interest, but she made no comment. Hurley was not at all sure that she had enjoyed, or even approved of their visit to the mine when she and Hunt parted from him at his own shack, although she thanked him politely.

The walk did not end for Hunt and his sister without a more adventurous incident. The sun had disappeared and the dusk had begun to thicken in corners and by-streets as they approached the hotel. There, at the mouth of a narrow lane, two figures stood, a man and a girl, and their voices were sharp and angry.

"That's what I'm telling you," the man's voice drawled, a note in it that at once raised in Hunt that feeling that any decent man experiences who hears one of his own sex so address a woman. "You got to come to it, and you might as well come now as later. I got you on the hip—that I have. Understand?"

"I understand nothing of the kind, Tolley. You're a bluffer and a beast! And if you don't let me alone——"

"Don't fool yourself," interrupted the man. "I won't let you alone till you come back to the Grub Stake. But I won't talk to you about it again. I'll talk to others."

Then the girl told him angrily to do his worst.

Betty attempted to pass on swiftly; but the young man hesitated.

"Do for goodness' sake come along, Ford!" whispered his sister, looking back at him.

Back in Ditson Corners—or in almost any other Eastern town—the Reverend Willett Ford Hunt would scarcely have shown his interest in such a scene on the street, save perhaps to speak to a constable or policeman about it.

But there was something here he could not ignore. Nor was it entirely because he recognized the angry voice of the girl, although he had not as yet seen her face in the dusk.

"You'll do what I tell you," muttered the bully with an oath, as Hunt stepped nearer. "If you don't come back to the Grub Stake to sing to-morrow night, I'll let the whole o' Canyon Pass know——"

It was just then that Hunt's hand dropped upon Boss Tolley's shoulder. Nor did it drop lightly. The parson twisted the big man around by one muscular exertion and looked into his flushed face.

"Don't you think you've said enough to the young lady?" Hunt asked quietly. "You have evidently forgotten yourself."

"What—why, you fool tenderfoot!"

"Suppose you go, Miss Blossom," suggested Hunt with unruffled voice. "Let me speak to this man."

But the minister had quite mistaken Nell Blossom's temper. She turned on him like a shot.

"What are you butting in for, I'd like to know? I can take care of myself—always have and always expect to." Then she laughed harshly, turning to Tolley again. "Better beat it, Tolley, or the parson will do something to you besides grabbing your hat."

The dance-hall keeper, swearing still, jerked away from Hunt's grasp. He did not seek to continue the quarrel, however. He abruptly turned up the alley and disappeared.

"For goodness' sake, Ford!" ejaculated Miss Betty.

Nell Blossom, thus attracted to the other girl, stepped nearer and stared at her. Her own face was unsmiling. If it had not been so really pretty one might have said it was a black look that she gave Betty. But it was an impish look, too.

"There are some things you'd better learn if you are going to stay in this camp, parson," said the singer. "The principal thing is to mind your own business. If I ever need your help in any little thing, I'll call on you."

She passed them both, still staring—now with curiosity—at Betty and went on along the street. Betty seized her brother's arm.

"What a horrid little creature!" she said.

CHAPTER XI

THE STORM ABOUT TO BURST

THERE was a strangely paradoxical feeling in the Reverend Willett Ford Hunt's mind. Nell Blossom was a subject of thought he could not escape. He could not wholly overlook her manners and speech; yet he did not feel that she was blameworthy for either.

What chance had this wild blossom of a girl ever had, out in this wilderness, the daughter of a drunken ne'er-do-well, as he had been told, taught from her childhood to sing for her own living and for her father's in the saloons of mining camps? Why, almost any other girl would have gone bad—as bad as could be. And he knew Nell Blossom was not bad.

He really wished he might make Joe Hurley his confidant about the girl, but, harking back to that letter of Joe's in which the latter had spoken so enthusiastically of Nell, the parson felt that his friend was too strongly prejudiced in Nell's favor to risk his criticizing her in any way.

One question recurred again and again to him: What did that man Tolley, who he knew was the

proprietor of the Grub Stake saloon and dance hall, mean by commanding Nell to return to his employment?

Betty saw her brother's more serious mien, and it must be confessed, wickedly hoped that the situation as it opened before him here at Canyon Pass was beginning to appall him. How could it do otherwise? Let alone the crudeness and lack of conveniences in their dwelling place, the nature of the people with whom they must associate, and the utter forlornness of life here in the mining town, that last incident as they walked back from the Great Hope Mine should impress Ford with the utter impracticability of his trying to begin a pastorate here.

The awful ruffian who had sworn at the girl—horrid as she seemed to be—shocked Betty beyond expression. And what a look that Nell Blossom, she had asked her brother the singer's name, had given her, Betty Hunt! As unfriendly, as hateful, as though the Eastern girl had done the singer some grievous wrong.

The strange girl had insulted and flouted Ford, too. Betty's loyalty to her brother was up in arms at that, if the truth were told. She could not but admire after all Ford's cool assumption of authority with the ruffian and with the cabaret singer as well. Why, Ford did not seem to be afraid of these people at all. Even Joe Hurley could have been no more

sure of himself in such a situation than her brother had proved to be.

For in spite of her disapproval of the mining man she realized that Joe was perfectly able to handle such situations and such rude people with equanimity. But then, he was of this soil. He was of the West. To tell the truth, Betty was inclined to think of Hurley as being quite as bad in manners, speech, and outlook on life as the other people of Canyon Pass.

She would say nothing about all this to her brother. Betty Hunt was quite capable of thinking things out for herself. Prejudiced she had been—and was—against the town and their visit to it; but she did not utterly lack logic. She went to bed that second night in the Wild Rose Hotel with somewhat different thoughts in her mind after all. At least, she did not drag the washstand in front of her locked door as a barrier.

In the morning the mining man appeared at the door of the hotel riding his big bay and leading two other saddled horses. The freight wagons had come in the evening before, and Betty had got her trunks. Out of one she had resurrected the riding habit which she had not worn of late, but which still fitted her perfectly and was chic.

But Betty was daunted by the look of the mount Hurley had selected for her.

"Mr. Hurley!" exclaimed Betty emphatically, "on your honor, is that horse safe?"

"As safe as a church. You hitch him on a railroad track, and he'd only step just far enough aside for the lightning express to go by without shaving him."

She looked at him, both puzzled and disapproving. "I never know when you are serious," she finally said.

"You can bet your last blue chip on the fact that I am taking no chances of a hoss throwing you or cutting up rusty while you're on his back," the man returned earnestly. "Hardscrabble is all right, Miss Betty."

He offered his hand to Betty for her to step into with all the grace of a courtier. He looked up into her eyes, too, as she mounted past his shoulder into the saddle, and his smile was so friendly that she could not help smiling in return.

Hunt swung himself on to his own mount—a rather rangy cayuse that promised speed as well as endurance. Hurley bounded into his own saddle from the step without touching the stirrups until he was seated. Bouncer stood up on his hind legs, snorted, came down stiff-legged, and bucked once just to show that he was in fine fettle. The other horses cantered away from the hotel more sedately.

They spattered through the West Fork and went into the canyon along the river trail. There was

not a soul in sight but themselves when they turned the first out-thrust of the cliff. Runaway River brawled in its bed. The huge, threatening cap of the Overhang cast its shadow almost to the opposite wall. The mighty rocks, the deep cracks in which the brush clung with tenuous roots, the wind-wrung, anguished, stunted trees, all held the visitors spell-bound. Such a devil's slot in the hills they could never have imagined without actually seeing it.

"Suppose that should fall?" Betty broke out pointing up at the frowning cap of the cliff.

"That's what we are supposing all the time, Miss Betty," replied Hurley quietly. "Part of it did fall about twenty years ago. That was long before my time, of course. But Bill Judson and some of the other old-timers can tell you about it. It came pretty near ringing the death-knell for Canyon Pass."

"Backed up the river into the town, did it?" asked the logical Hunt.

"I'll say it did! And over the town. Judson says it was so deep over his store that he went out from the headlands in a flatboat and grappled through the skylight of his joint for tobacco out of the showcase. Takes that old-timer to spread it on thick," and he chuckled.

"But is it likely to happen again?" cried Betty.

"Any day—any hour—any minute," repeated Hurley quietly. "There are thousands of tons of

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stuff up there that may fall. Choke the canyon half-wall high. If it does, there'll be a lake here that'll furnish water enough to irrigate blame near all of the Topaz Desert—believe me. Canyon Pass will have to go into raising frogs or such," and he laughed.

"Oh! I felt that it was a dangerous place to live in," murmured Betty.

"Great saltpeter!" exclaimed Hurley again. "No worse than folks who live on the sides of volcanoes in Italy, for instance. Or in the earthquake belt along the Pacific coast. Pshaw!"

"But—but there is so much room out here, Mr. Hurley," cried Betty. "Why not choose a safer place in which to establish a town?"

"The mines and washings. Gold established Canyon Pass. It isn't a beautiful spot, but it's handy. We got to just keep on hoping that the Overhang doesn't fall."

"There is a place where some of it has fallen—and recently," Hunt broke in, with some gravity.

Half blocking the trail, and bulking along the river's edge for perhaps ten yards, was a heap of gravel and soil on which no grass or other verdure grew. Looking up the sloping canyon wall they could trace the downfall of this small slide for more than half the distance to the summit.

"What is that sticking out of it?" asked Betty. "A stick?"

Hurley sniffed like a bird-dog that has just raised a covey. He was to windward of the heap. Hunt had forced his mount nearer from the other side.

"That is not a stick," he said quietly. "It looks to me like——"

Hurley ejaculated something that was very near an oath. He flung himself out of his saddle and strode over the rubble. He stopped and examined the thing Betty had seen, even touching it with his gauntleted hand.

"Never heard of this," he muttered. "Odd, I must say!"

"What is it?" asked Hunt.

"A horse's leg. Been pecked clean by the vultures—not by coyotes, or the bones would be torn apart. Well!"

"Oh, there has been a dreadful accident here! Is somebody buried under that pile of gravel?" demanded Betty.

"Not likely. Just a cayuse. Maybe a wandering critter. Happened to be right here—taking a drink at the riverside, maybe—when the slide fell. Or it might have been the cause of the slip. Came down with it," Hurley explained in jerky sentences. "The weight of the hoss might have broke off a piece of the Overhang and—here he is!"

This seemed to satisfy him. He went back to his own horse and mounted again.

They rode several miles farther, but Joe Hurley

did not seem quite so volatile as usual. Was he "studying" on the buried horse by the riverside? At least, when they rode back toward noon, he fell behind at the point where the small landslip had landed, halting his horse beside it for a moment. He overtook his friends in a short time, however, but did not say anything.

As they sighted the ford again, down from the upland on this side came a dashing and brilliant-hued figure—a girl on a cream-colored pony. Hunt recognized Nell Blossom at first glance.

"Hi, Nell!" shouted Hurley, raising his hand and arm, palm out, in the Indian peace sign.

She scarcely nodded to him, but she grinned elfishly as she rode down into the shallows and her pony's flying feet spattered them all at the river's edge. She scarcely seemed to give Hunt and his sister a glance. She plied the quirt that hung from her wrist, and the cream-colored pony recklessly forded the stream and climbed the further bank.

"How impolite," murmured the Eastern girl, brushing the drops from her sleeve.

"She's a little devil," agreed Hurley frankly. "That's the lady I was telling you of, Willie. She's as wild as a jack rabbit."

Hunt nodded soberly. He made no other comment. As they rode up into Main Street they heard wild yells and hootings from the far end, then the

pattering of a pony's rapid hoofbeats. Back toward the ford tore the cream-colored pony bearing the bizarre figure of the cabaret singer.

Now Nell rode without touching the bridle reins. She swung the whip and cracked it sharply. In the other hand she gripped a six-shooter of practical size and weight.

"What is the matter with that crazy creature?" asked Betty.

Hurley merely laughed. Nell Blossom approached at a wild gallop. Men appeared at the doors of various stores and saloons along the street and yelled their delight.

"Ye-yip! Yip-py-yip!" shrieked the appreciative audience. "Oh, you Nell! Ye-yow! Git out o' town!"

The girl, her face glowing, her hair flying from under her hat, her whole figure electric with life and abundance of spirit, rode faster and faster. As she approached the front of the Grub Stake she saw the slouching figure of its proprietor backed against the wall by the door, smoking. He grinned evilly at the rider.

Nell pressed the trigger. Five staccato shots whistled skyward. The sixth ruffled the lank hair on Boss Tolley's head and splintered the door frame just above it!

The divekeeper dodged and crouched, as though expecting another bullet. He almost slunk into his

barroom. Then he realized that the girl had made a show of him and was riding on, applauded by the laughter and shrieks of the onlookers.

He whirled, and, lifting both hands, shook the clenched fists after the flying Nell. He was almost apoplectic with rage. He burst forth:

"You crazy, derved hoptoad of a gal! Somebody ought to grab you off that animal. Shootin' at folks thataway! Is that what you done when you drove poor Dick Beckworth over the edge of the Overhang?"

The incoming trio of riders—Hurley, Hunt and Betty—were almost opposite the Grub Stake as Tolley emitted these words. In a flash the mining man was out of the saddle and standing in front of the startled Tolley.

"What do you mean, you miserable scoundrel?" demanded Joe in so threatening a tone that Tolley fell back against the side of the building again. "What do you mean about Dick Beckworth?"

Hunt had spurred his own horse nearer. He feared Joe would do something rash. The rolling, bloodshot eye of the divekeeper expressed fear of the other; but he was too much enraged to call caution to his aid at that moment.

"I mean what I say," he rumbled. "You don't know it, and nobody else in Canyon Pass, I reckon, knows it but me. But I know that derved crazy

gal was the cause of Dick Beckworth's end. And a mean end it was."

"Dick the Devil, *dead?*"

"That's what he is," said Tolley with less vehemence. He sensed that it would not be wise to be so vociferous with Joe Hurley's eyes glaring into his own. "Dick come to a mighty mean end. I seen it; but I didn't know what it **m**eaned."

"It's more likely you killed **him**, Tolley—if he's dead. Or did you have him gunned by Tom Hicks or some other of your friends?" demanded Hurley sharply.

"I never! Poor Dick wasn't expectin' nawthin', I allow. That crazy gal——"

"Be blamed easy how you bring Nell's name into this," muttered Hurley, his hand upon the butt of his own gun.

Hunt leaned from his saddle and laid his hand upon his friend's shoulder. Hurley did not look back—he knew better, for there was likewise a gun at Boss Tolley's belt.

"All right, Willie," the mining man said. "Let's listen to what this rat has to say. But be blame careful, Tolley, that you don't raise your voice too high. If you do, I'll certainly maul you a pile."

CHAPTER XII

TOLLEY'S TALE

HUNT had a feeling that he was present at one of those tense scenes of a Western cinema drama, where the heroic gunman holds the villain under the muzzle of his lethal weapon.

He might have leaned from his horse again and plucked both Joe Hurley's gun and that of the dive-keeper from their holsters. But he thought twice about that. Neither of the men was in the mood to brook interference. Besides, the parson was keenly alive to the mystery manifested in Tolley's words regarding Nell Blossom and the man called Dick the Devil.

Nobody else was near enough to have overheard what passed between Tolley and Joe Hurley. None of the other Passonians, amused by Nell's wild escapade, drew nearer, and Betty had ridden on to the hotel, refusing to betray the least interest in such a rude scene.

"Speak up, Tolley!" commanded Hurley again. "You've been telling us Dick Beckworth went to Denver to deal faro at a gambling house there. Now you come out with such a thing as this—mixing

Nell's name up in some blamed lie about Dick's being killed."

"He was killed. It was murder—or mighty close to it. And that gal——"

He halted again. There was something in Joe Hurley's eyes that stopped him.

"Suppose you start this thing right," said the mine owner more quietly. "I understand Dick Beckworth left town the morning old Steve and Andy McCann broke out, the same as usual, this spring?"

"And the same morning that gal left me and the Grub Stake flat, and went kitin' off," retorted Tolley.

"Well, let's hear the particulars."

"I didn't know Nell had gone at first." He winced, having spoken the girl's name again, because of the darting threat from Hurley's brown eyes. "When Dick told me he was off I didn't scarce believe him. But then I seen him and that—er—gal riding down to the ford. I thought they was up to some game. Anyway, I thought I could talk Dick into coming back. He was the best dealer I ever had."

"Well?" snapped Hurley.

"I saddled a hoss and went after them. They'd followed the wagon track to the top of the cliff. But I thought they'd took the river trail. When I got a piece along the road, I heard something go

bam—a fall of rock, or something, down the cliff. I hurried my nag and come around a turn where I could see. I looked up—never thought to look ahead along the edge of Runaway River, I see her—Nell—looking over the edge of the cliff.

“I see then I was follering the wrong lead,” pursued Tolley. “I didn’t think much about the slip I’d heard—not then. I wanted to get at Dick. So I turned back, got to the foot of the wagon track up the cliff yonder,” he pointed, “and hurried after them.

“When I got up there neither of ’em was in sight. I hustled along the road and went clean past the fork of the Hoskins’ trail. Never thought of either of ’em going to that dump,” grumbled Tolley.

“Well, I give it up after a while. I thought I’d lost too much time, starting out wrong at first as I had. They was too fast for me. So I rode back. It wasn’t till then, when I come to that place I’d seen Nell looking over from, that I saw how big a lump had broke off the edge of the Overhang.”

Hurley sucked in his breath sharply. “Go on!” was all he said.

“I looked down there. I seen how big the slide was. And I seen something more. There was something sticking out of that heap of stuff on the river bank. I couldn’t be sure, but I thought it was the hind parts of a hoss, only upside down.

"I pushed my hoss along the river trail again and come to the heap of stuff that had come down the clifft. It hadn't come down alone."

Hunt, listening as closely as Hurley, had no idea how his friend felt; but for his own part his flesh crawled at the inference he drew from Tolley's tale. The man let his last words sink into their minds for fully a minute before he went on.

"It hit me right where I lived. Something bad had happened. It hadn't happened to the gal. So I figgered it must be Dick.

"And I wasn't mistook," continued Tolley with a certain satisfaction in his tone. "I'd been right when I thought there was a hoss in that pile of gravel. There was—but not much of it stickin' out. However, I clawed down to the saddle, undid it, and hauled it out. It was Dick's all right. I got it now stuck into the bottom of my big safe."

"But where was Dick?" demanded Hurley.

"How should *I* know?" retorted the other. "Maybe under the heap—but I didn't think so. I reckon he was throwed clean into the river. And you know what the current of Runaway River is!"

Hurley groaned.

"Wait!" said Hunt suddenly. "The man you call Dick might not have gone over the cliff with the horse. You did not see the accident."

"He didn't come back to town. And he wouldn't have gone on afoot to Hoskins or any place else,"

Tolley said surlily. "Nobody ain't seen him around yere from that day to this."

"And you lied about Dick and kept it under your hat all this time?" was Hurley's comment.

"Well, I had a right, didn't I?" blustered Tolley.

"Every right in the world." The mining man spoke evenly now, coldly. "And you've got a better right to keep the story to yourself right along."

"What d'ye mean?"

"What I say. Keep your mouth shut about it. Don't let me hear of you opening your yawp the way you did just now. I don't half believe this yarn, anyway. You couldn't tell *all* the truth about anything, Tolley. The truth isn't in you. But sometimes a half-truth does more harm than a whole lie. You stick to your first story about Dick the Devil going to Denver. Understand?"

"I don't understand why I should do what you say, Hurley."

The latter patted the butt of his own gun. "Notice that?" he said with a deadly fierceness that shocked Hunt. "If you repeat this yarn, I'll come after you. And if I come after you, Tolley, I'll get you!"

He went back to the waiting Bouncer and mounted into the saddle without another word or a glance at Tolley. But Hunt, his nerves strained to a tension he had never before experienced, watched the owner of the Grub Stake sharply. Hurley's

disregard of the fellow amazed the man from the East. He did not realize that Tolley was so unstrung that he could not have hit the broad side of a barn if he had drawn his gun. But Joe Hurley knew it.

The two young men rode on to the door of the hotel, both silent. Cholo Sam was watching Betty's pony. The girl had dismounted and gone up to her room.

"Joe, what is going to be the end of this?" asked Hunt in a low voice.

"I don't know, Willie."

"Will you speak——"

"To Nell? Not on your life!"

"But the truth will come out some time. Who was that Dick?"

Hurley told him. He went further and told of the interest the cabaret singer had shown in the gambler for some time previous to Dick's disappearance—before Nell had gone to Hoskins to sing in the Tin Can Saloon.

"It—it looks bad," faltered Hunt.

"Bad is no name for it."

"The girl should be questioned."

"Not by me!" cried Hurley. "I don't think Tolley will run the risk of speaking to her about it," he added.

"He has already," said Hunt.

He explained about what he and Betty had over-

heard pass between Nell Blossom and the owner of the Grub Stake the evening previous.

"Great saltpeter!" gasped Hurley. "Then that's why Nell cut that caper just now. She didn't do it just for deviltry. She was warning Tolley on her own hook."

"Joe, there must be no bloodshed over this. If one man has died, that is enough," Hunt said sternly. "We must get at the truth."

"Not me!" cried Hurley again. "I wouldn't tackle Nell for a farm."

"And—and you are so close to her—know her so well?" murmured Hunt.

"That ain't no never-mind," the mining man said earnestly. "That girl's got teeth, I tell you."

"But she is in danger. She must be questioned."

"Great saltpeter! You wouldn't get nothing out of Nell Blossom—nothing that she didn't want to tell."

"She should be convinced that her greater danger lies in silence."

"Convince Nell? What did I tell you, Willie? You couldn't make her do a thing, or even see a thing, that she did not want to do or see."

"There is one thing I can do," said Hunt finally.

"What's that, Willie?" and his friend sighed.

"Find me a pickax and shovel."

"What's that?"

"A pickax and a shovel. At once."

"Great—— Say, that's a new one. I never thought of getting an idea into Nell Blossom's stubborn head with those tools. But it might work at that," and Hurley rode off to get the instruments of labor, but without a smile.

CHAPTER XIII

PLANS ARE MADE

HURLEY brought back with him two shovels instead of one, and the pick. The two young men took a roundabout way to the ford so that Boss Tolley might not spy them and suspect where they were going.

They did not talk much. Both were thinking too deeply—were much too disturbed by the up-rearing of this tragic thing—for idle chatter. Hunt wondered how his friend really thought of Nell Blossom. For his own part he was heavily depressed by this thing that had come to light.

The situation threatened serious consequences for the cabaret singer. In a more law-abiding community the coronor's office would have summoned Nell Blossom for examination if the district attorney did not. And in any case, Hunt believed, the whole miserable business must come at last to the light of day.

It was past noon when Hunt and his friend arrived at that heap of dirt and débris that had before attracted their attention. But neither of them thought of the hour or of the midday meal.

Hunt, dismounting, allowed the reins to trail upon the ground before his horse's nose as he saw Hurley did with Bouncer. Both animals were well trained. He removed coat, vest, and Tom Hicks' broad-brimmed hat which he still affected. Rolling up his sleeves he seized the pick and went at the task with the skill as well as the strength of a trained ditch-digger. Hurley admired the parson's ability thus displayed.

"Some boy, you, Willie. I'll tell the world you know something besides pounding the pulpit. Where's that shovel?"

· They uncovered the dead animal and threw it into the swift, deep current of the Runaway.

They did not cease digging, however, until every square yard of the fallen soil and rubble from the top of the cliff had been combed over. They covered one section with the upturned windrow of another. Nothing which had fallen with that fatal landslide remained unseen. But what they had feared to find was not in evidence.

"Either Tolley's guess was right, or Dick Beckworth never came down that wall with his horse," Hurley said with finality.

Hunt nodded, finally leaning on his spade. "At least, we have satisfied our own minds," he said. "That is something."

"And mighty little. Dick isn't here. I bet a thousand he didn't go to Hoskins with Nell. He

wouldn't have walked in any case. Then, where the devil is he?"

"That is not the main question," rejoined the parson thoughtfully. "The principal thing is to get at the truth about this accident. What happened up there at the top of the cliff? Did the man come down with the horse and these several tons of gravel and soil? And if he came down, what became of his body?"

"Great saltpeter!" Hurley brought out his uncouth ejaculation with a new emphasis. "Do you suppose Tolley, after all, knows more about that than Nell does?"

"What?" Then Hunt understood. "It might be," he said slowly. "Evidently Tolley was not pleased by that gambler's leaving him, any more than he was pleased by Miss Blossom's leaving him. It might be——"

"It might be," finished Hurley with vigor, "that Boss Tolley is dragging a skunk after him to fool the hounds."

Hunt admitted the truth of this rather homely expression. "All the more reason why the girl must be questioned," he said.

"You're crazy, Willie!" cried Hurley. "You will get nothing out of Nell—if she doesn't want to talk. And if she knows anything at all about this, and is at all connected with the matter of Dick's disap-

pearance, you can just bet she's got good reason for keeping her lips closed."

"For her own sake, she should confide in us—in you, at least. She will need our help and our support if this comes out."

"She's got mine, whether or no," Hurley said, slinging on his belt and gun again.

Perhaps Hunt thought he spoke significantly as he hitched the weapon into place. He wagged a disagreeing head.

"That sort of support will not save Nell Blossom's soul," he observed thoughtfully. "To blow off Tolley's head will not help her one iota in cleansing her mind and heart of anguish if she has guilty knowledge of that man's death—if he is dead."

"I tell you that Dick the Devil was well named," cried Hurley furiously. "Why some man before this had not beaten him to death is a mystery. If Nell shot him off the edge of that cliff, he got what was coming to him, and no more."

"Oh!" murmured Hunt, with a shudder. "It might not be that she has such a terrible sin as that on her conscience!"

"I don't give a hang," returned his friend. "If she had, there ain't twelve men in Canyon County that would convict her of it. Don't tell me!"

"Oh, Joe! You don't see. You don't understand," urged his friend sadly. "What matters

man's conviction of her crime? It is of what her own heart may convict her."

"'Twouldn't bother me none if I'd sent Dick the Devil over that cliff," declared Hurley. "But I leave it to you, parson. You maybe know more about such things than I do. To tell the truth, you do. Otherwise I wouldn't have had any hopes of your doing any good in Canyon Pass. Maybe you know more about womankind than I do, as well," he added, a bitter smile wreathing his lips once more. "I wish you all the luck in the world when you tackle Nell Blossom on this topic. But I wouldn't be in your shoes for half my stock in the Great Hope."

Anxious as he was made by the outbreak of this affair the Reverend Willett Ford Hunt did not forget the work that he earnestly hoped to begin in Canyon Pass. Nor did he delay in laying plans for the efforts he hoped would aid in changing the moral tone of the town.

It was that evening in the Three Star Grocery where he went with Joe Hurley that the first tentative plan was discussed. Jib Collins, who seemed to have been much impressed by the young minister on Sunday afternoon, was there, as well as the old storekeeper himself. With them several of the more sober citizens joined in conversation.

Hunt struck while the iron was hot. The first thing, he thought, was to find some place in which

services could be held on Sunday. He had seen at least one empty store, or warehouse, he told them, which might be cleaned out and put into fairly decent shape. He had looked into the windows. There was a dingy sign on the front which said it was for sale.

"Dad burn it, parson!" exclaimed Judson, "you must mean that old place of Tolley's."

"Tolley?" repeated Hunt with disappointment. "Does it belong to that man?"

"Sure does," said Jib Collins.

"It used to be where Tolley had his honkytonk before he built his bigger place. He owns it, of course," Hurley remarked.

"Then I presume we could scarcely count on getting it," said Hunt with reflection. "Tolley is vigorously opposed, I understand, to this thing we wish to do."

"Hold on," put in the storekeeper. "Let's study on it. In the first place, you all keep it under your hats, and maybe I can do something with Tolley."

"You'll do a fat lot with him," prophesied Collins.

"Mebbe so. We'll see. How 'bout that 'wisdom of sarpints' the Good Book speaks of, parson?" said the storekeeper. "You lemme try to fix it with Tolley. That's all."

"Oh, we'll leave it to you, old-timer," Hurley

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said laughingly. "Nobody will begrudge you that job."

"If we get that place—or some other—we must have seats," Hunt went on. "There are many things to think of—and many things to get together before next Sunday. A week is none too long to prepare for such a work."

"And a pulpit," Collins proposed. "Me and Cale could knock up a pulpit—of a kind. We are some carpenters—me and Cale. If I can get him to help."

Hunt was perfectly willing to put such burdens as he might upon the friendly citizens of Canyon Pass. In fact, that is just what he wanted them to do—take hold of the new idea as though they really supported it. The discussion, although of generalities, brought forth some concrete results.

Judson knew that Tolley was anxious to do something with the old shack. Judson intimated that he expected to need more room for goods. He did not say exactly when he would need it; but he got Tolley down to an agreement, and they made a bargain. The storekeeper paid a nominal rent for the shack six months in advance, agreeing to make such repairs as the place might need himself.

The business was kept secret, although Collins and Cale Mack went to work on their part of the job the very next day. Others collected seats and a few other furnishings. Everything was of the

plainest; even the pulpit was built of unpainted boards. But Hunt saw that the place was clean.

Judson furnished lamps from his stock. "We'll want evening meetings, too," he said. "After we get to going, I mean. It won't be a bad idea to commence running a show that will compete with the Grub Stake and Colorado Brown's and those other joints. The boys drop into the saloons because there ain't another derved place in the town to go to after dark."

On Wednesday Hunt, walking toward the mines, confronted unexpectedly the withered, baldheaded man he had carried home over his shoulder on Sunday morning. Sam Tubbs stopped him.

"I reckon you're the parson, ain't you?" he asked, cocking his head in a birdlike way to look up at Hunt. "My old woman is right smart anxious to see you again. That woman's all for this here religion they say you are going to deal out to the boys. Says she's got something for you."

"Thank you, Mr. Tubbs. I will go around and call on her."

"Well, you can if you like. Miz Tubbs is pretty nigh big enough to be her own boss, and what I say don't affect her no more than as though I shot my mouth off in the middle of Topaz Desert. That's a fact. I hear you are a pretty decent feller, as parsons go; but I might as well tell you right now that I ain't—and don't ever mean to be—a convert."

"I shall like you none the less for that, Mr. Tubbs," said Hunt, smiling and offering his hand. "A man must always decide for himself, you know. I shall be glad to have you come to hear me preach; but you need not believe a word I say unless your own mind tells you I am right."

"Huh!" grunted Sam, rather staggered. "That sounds fair. Mebbe I will come to hear you—sometime. If you last long enough."

This opinion—that the parson would not last in his attempt to uplift Canyon Pass—seemed to be the view of the general run of Passonians.

He had a few very enthusiastic coworkers, however. He found one when he went to call upon Mother Tubbs.

"It's been in my heart for many a long day, Brother Hunt," the old woman said. "This here holding meetings, and the like. I said a long time back I'd give a pretty if a man of God would come in here and shake this camp like a snowslide in the mountains. We need to get a mighty bump. You-betcha!

"Now the time's come, I'm just as excited as a gal going to her first dance. I can't make Sam enthuse none; and I'm disappointed in Nell, I do say. But I am going to do all I can myself to boost your job for you."

"Thank you, Sister Tubbs," said the young parson. "Is Miss Blossom here?"

"She's upstairs a-dressin'. But I don't reckon she'll give you much but the rough side of her tongue. Lately, Nell seems to be bewitched. Think of her ridin' her pony up and down the street the other day, shootin' and cavortin' like a drunken cow-puncher! She puts on these didoes jest for devilment. And she ain't got a good word for you and your plans, Brother Hunt."

"Well," said the parson calmly, "perhaps things will change with her in time. We won't worry."

"I'm glad you can take it so calm," said Mother Tubbs, sniffing. "Now, come in yere. This is what I got for you."

She led the way into the inner room, half bedroom and half sitting room, the principal room in the shack. There was a small center table. On it was a huge tome with tarnished brass clasps—a bulky volume that had evidently seen much rough usage. Mother Tubbs put her hand upon it proudly.

"See that, Brother Hunt?" she said. "It's the old Bible out of the Blue Lick Chapel down in Arkansas. The chapel burned down when I was a gal; but the Bible was saved. When my folks moved out thisaway we brung it with us, and it's been in the bottom of an old trunk of mine for forty year. Now it comes to light." She opened it with care. "I reckon you got all the Bibles you need to work with. But I do like to see a big one like this on the pulpit for show."

"This is most thoughtful and kind of you, Sister Tubbs," declared Hunt, understanding the spirit of pride and reverence in which the old woman had offered the book. "I shall see that it rests on our pulpit."

At that moment Nell Blossom came into the room from the stairway. She nodded to him brusklly, but offered him no welcoming hand.

"I declare, Nell," complained the old woman, "you ain't going out without a word to the parson, are you?"

"I've no particular word for the parson," returned the girl, a glint of ice in her blue eyes.

"If you will allow me to say so, Miss Blossom," said Hunt quietly, "I have a particular word for you."

She stared at him angrily. He picked up his hat from the chair.

"If you are going out," he said, "I will walk along with you and say what I have to say."

"Humph! I can't stop you from walking up Mulligan Lane. It's free," returned the girl most ungraciously and walked ahead of him out of the house.

CHAPTER XIV

THE GREAT DAY ARRIVES

HUNT caught up with Nell Blossom when she had passed through the gap in the barrelstave picket-fence, and his length of stride easily kept him beside the girl. Unless Nell broke into a run she could scarcely leave the parson out of earshot.

"Miss Blossom," he began, "my interference in your affairs calls for no excuse. I have no vulgar curiosity. You tell me to mind my own business. But when I see another in trouble it is my business to offer aid."

"I am not in trouble," she answered sharply. Then, with scorn: "And if I was, I wouldn't want a parson's help."

"No. But a friend's help? I assure you I am your friend."

She now looked at him rather curiously, but her expression did not soften in the least. Doubt, scorn, a real dislike of the man who sought to gain her confidence struggled to gain the mastery of her pretty features.

"I don't know you, I've only seen you a few times. I don't make friends so easy——"

"We don't make friends in this world, Miss Blossom. We win them whether we would or not. You have won my friendly feeling because I know that you are troubled. I know what your trouble is, and I believe I can help you."

His downrightness startled Nell, and she stopped and stared at him.

"You can't help me if I don't want your help," she cried in secret panic.

"I cannot help you so much if you deny me your confidence," he admitted. "But I stand ready to help you."

"You'd better sit down," she shot at him. "You'll have a long wait standing for me to get confidential with you, Mr. Parson."

"Consider," said Hunt seriously, unshaken. "We cannot any of us afford to refuse an honest offer of sympathy and assistance."

"What are you trying to do?" she asked with suspicion. "Trying to squeeze something out of me? You parsons!"

She muttered the phrase disdainfully. He put her rudeness aside without change of countenance. His placidity, his assurance, began to shake Nell's confidence in herself more than any other thing.

"I have heard something. I have seen something. I know that if you will listen to me—perhaps accept and follow some advice I may give you—you will be benefited," he said.

"In what way, I should like to know?" she asked jeeringly.

"In your heart. In your mind and conscience."

"Well!" She was silent again for a moment, but her face did not change in its expression. "Well, you can talk, I reckon," and she moved on slowly again. "There ain't any law against talking in Canyon Pass—yet."

"From the few words I heard that man, Tolley, say to you on Sunday evening, I know that he threatened you," Hunt said directly.

"That beast!"

"He thinks he has knowledge that will make you trouble if spread broadcast in the town."

"Let him dare!"

Her face was suddenly that of a young and beautiful fury. Hunt shook his head, saying softly:

"Killing him would not remove the cause of your trouble, Nell Blossom."

She turned on him again, her little fists clenched.

"How much do you know? Out with it!" she commanded.

"I will tell you what Tolley says."

"So you've been snooping and prying, have you?" she queried, her rage almost suffocating her.

"I will tell you what Tolley says," repeated Hunt. And he did so calmly, dispassionately, as though he were relating a series of common facts. "That man's horse was under the fall from the cliff. The

man's body is not there—if he fell with the horse.” Nell did not even wince, still staring into his eyes, her own as hard as flint. “Those are all the facts in my possession, Miss Blossom.”

She remained silent. She had recovered both her regular breathing and her composed manner. He could only read in her features a determination that was adamant.

“Will you answer a few questions?” he ventured.

“Out with them!”

“What caused the horse to fall?”

“You gump! He fell because the bank gave way,” she replied rudely.

“What became of his rider?”

“I don't know.”

“Did you leave him at that spot?”

She waited a moment. Then, as harshly as before:

“Yes.”

“You have not seen him since? Or communicated with him?”

“Dick Beckworth? I should say not!”

“Do you know what became of him?”

A bitter, sneering smile marred her lips. “I know what Tolley says—that he's in Denver.”

“Tolley proposes to deny that now,” Hunt said softly.

“Let him. One lie is as good as another, and Boss Tolley's full of them.”

"Will you help me discover if Beckworth is alive?"

"I tell you once for all, I don't want anything more to do with Dick the Devil. I don't want to even hear about him."

"Then you and he quarreled?"

The mistake was fatal, and the parson knew it the instant he had said the unwise words. But he could not recall them.

"See here, Parson Hunt! you're making a nuisance of yourself. I want to tell you that no tenderfoot will get far in Canyon Pass if he begins as you have. I've got nothing to tell you. I won't talk to you. I don't want a thing to do with you. Now! Am I plain enough?"

She walked on stoutly, her head up, her cheeks aflame. For a few yards he walked quietly beside her. Then he lifted his hat and turned aside. When Nell had disappeared, Hunt sadly shook his head.

"I fear," he told himself, "that I have made a bad beginning."

Circumstances that followed proved that his suspicion was correct. In less than twenty-four hours he heard that without a doubt he had made another enemy.

"I don't know how it is, parson," said Bill Judson shaking a mournful head, "but that little devil, Nell Blossom, is on the warpath. And she's after your scalp."

"It is stuck on pretty tightly, Mr. Judson," Hunt replied with a smile.

"'Tain't no laughing matter. Nell has a terrible drag with the boys. If she don't have you run out of town, she may try to bust up your show. She says you're a mischief-maker, and all that. She's plumb down on parsons."

"We will have to convince her that the tribe is harmless."

"Not much chance," said Judson, who evidently shared Hurley's opinion of Nell's obstinacy.

"Time will cure all that," said the parson, with more apparent confidence than he really felt.

While preparations were going forward for the first meeting with satisfactory speed, Hunt heard on every hand of the gathering forces of opposition.

Nell Blossom had resurrected the old song, "This Is No Place for a Minister's Son," and in a ridiculous clerical make-up sang it each night in Colorado Brown's place. Passing along the street to his hotel Hunt heard the chorus roared by the men who applauded the cabaret singer. He was met with more jeering laughter wherever he went than before; and he realized that ridicule would do the good cause more harm than any other form of opposition.

Joe Hurley was very busy at the mine that week, and he had not much to say to his friend from the

East when they met. But he showed curiosity as to what had befallen Hunt when he talked with Nell Blossom.

"I fear I began wrong," admitted the parson.

"I reckon however you began you wouldn't get far with Nell," observed Hurley. "I'll keep my eye on Tolley. He's just boiling inside. But unless he has a gang behind him he hasn't any more spunk than a rabbit. Nell's too popular—just now, especially—for him to dare spring anything against her. And she certainly is making herself well-beloved with the boys from the Eureka Washings and the other mines," and he grinned ruefully.

"I can keep most of my own roughnecks in line. I reckon they kind of cotton to me, and they know I am set on this church business. But Nell certainly holds the camp in the hollow of her hand."

"She is wrong; but she does not realize it, perhaps," considered Hunt. "And yet, maybe she does know."

The Reverend Willett Ford Hunt might have considered, as his sister believed at that moment, that the outlook for successful religious work in Canyon Pass was quite as foggy as it had been at any time at Ditson Corners. Yet the opposition that had developed here was nothing more than Hunt had expected. And it was open hostility. There was nothing hypocritical about it.

He had met Slickpenny Norris at the bank, Hunt

had opened an account there, and had invited the old curmudgeon to take some interest in the church proposal. He had got one large grunt from the banker, and that was all. Norris could be as close-mouthed as a clam when it might be to his disadvantage to speak his mind. But he offered no encouragement to the parson by that grunt.

Saturday evening came and those who were most interested in the uplift of Canyon Pass gathered at the old Tolley place to view with satisfaction and no little pride the improvements and changes brought about.

"Jib," remarked Judson to Collins, having deserted the Three Star Grocery and left it in the care of the gangling Smithy at a very busy hour to "take a squint" at the interior of the meeting room, "Jib, you and Cale Mack have certainly done yourselves proud on that pulpit."

"Don't praise me! Don't praise me!" exclaimed Collins. "I never could stand flattery. It puffs me all up. But it's a pretty nifty bit of work, I do agree."

"Yeppy," pursued the storekeeper. "It has a slant to one side that maybe is more the fault of the floor than your spirit-level, Jib. And it looks sort o' wobbly. But barrin' them defects, it's what I'd call a sightly pulpit."

"It's strong enough," grunted Collins gruffly, now

not so much pleased. "I don't reckon the parson is going to take a maul to it, is he?"

Mother Tubbs just then entered the door. Behind her staggered Sam, his reeling motion for once having no connection with an alcoholic cause. Sam Tubbs was dead sober—and quite as positively provoked.

"I snun to man!" he croaked. "Makin' a pack-hoss of a man thisaway! If that danged parson wanted this yere Bible he ought've come and toted it himself."

"It's very good of you to bring it, Mr. Tubbs," said Hunt, smiling and coming forward to relieve the old man of his burden.

Hunt placed the big Bible on the pulpit. One of the interested housewives had sent a rather handsome linen table-scarf for a pulpit cloth, and although it was somewhat yellowed from disuse, it made the unpainted desk seem less bare.

They drifted in, one by one and in couples, during the evening, these people deprived so long of the inspiration of worship in a public sense, some bringing hymn-books of various sorts and a few Bibles. But Hunt had not come to Canyon Pass unprepared on that score for church work. He had brought with him from the East fifty hymn-books of the more popular kind and a dozen Bibles for the use of the congregation in general. When these had

been distributed about the benches they made, Mother Tubbs declared, "a mighty tasty show."

Betty was present to be introduced to the women of the camp. Whatever her private feelings were, the parson's sister could be, and was on this occasion, a very helpful assistant to her brother. If the Passonians felt a little awkward, Betty put them quickly at their ease. She made a most fortunate impression on them all, and the general opinion was "that that Eastern gal was a perfect lady."

Joe Hurley appeared with some of the younger men. They were all scrubbed till their faces shone, shaved to a nicety, and their hair "slicked" and anointed with everything Jose, the Mexican barber, had on his shelves.

"Umph!" murmured Mother Tubbs, wrinkling her nose appreciatively. "Certainly smells proper good since them fellers come in yere. I never did see why bay rum smells so much better than drink-in' rum. And bay rum's the only kind of liquor I approve of. The other I only get at second-hand—on Sam's breath!"

It was late in the evening, and the town was getting lively, though it seemed not so noisy as on most pay-nights, when they scattered from the door of the meeting room.

Hunt and Betty were the last to go. He latched the door behind them, but there was no thought in his mind of locking it. That anybody would enter

the place before morning did not cross his thought.

But later in the night, when this end of Main Street was deserted and the frolicking in the various amusement places was continued only by a few irrepressibles, a figure stole out of the alley beside the old Tolley building and slipped into the room prepared for the first Sunday service in Canyon Pass.

Without a light in the place the intruder had some difficulty in reaching the desk; once there, some few moments elapsed while the uninvited visitor climbed into the pulpit and opened carefully the big Bible. When the book was as carefully closed again, without the white book-marks the parson had placed in it having been disturbed, the obtrusive one departed.

Outside, there seemed an air of satisfaction about the very way this unknown individual walked away. In addition, a very determined—almost viciously resolved-voice observed:

“There! If that impudent pulpit-pounder don’t get his, I miss my guess!”

CHAPTER XV

PEP AND A LITTLE PEPPER

ALL Sabbaths were not fine at Canyon Pass, as Hunt realized on opening his eyes on that important morning. From the same open window through which he had viewed the chaste glories of the Topaz Range a week before, he now saw heavy, thunderous-looking clouds wrapping the peaks and surging down into the lower reaches of the landscape, blotting out, as they moved on, each monument that he had learned in this brief time of his sojourn to know. It promised no fair day for the parson's first service.

This, however, was not the basis of the heaviness that oppressed him. Hunt admitted the cause of his heartsick feeling without dodging the issue. It was Nell Blossom and her attitude toward him personally that so troubled the parson of Canyon Pass. That she opposed the good work he was trying to inaugurate was only a side issue in Hunt's mind. Opposition in general merely spurred a spirit like his to greater effort. That is, a frank opposition.

But the minister's personal interest in Nell Blossom had become something that controlled him. He could not control it.

It was not right, he told himself, to do any poaching on what he considered Joe's preserves. Whether or not Nell cared for the mine owner, Hunt believed he would be disloyal to his friend if he showed anything but the interest of a minister and religious adviser in the young woman.

Hunt was honest enough to admit that such feeling was not what inspired him in the matter. Nell Blossom was not at all the kind of girl he would have deliberately chosen as the object of a serious affection. But who of us may choose when love enters the lists?

The winsomeness of Nell shone through the rough and prickly husk of her. He realized that no man could see in all its clarity the girl's soul. He believed that the untaught mining-camp child, used as she was to the rude life about her and only that life, was really out of her natural element. Whatever Henry Blossom, Nell's dissolute father, may have been, the girl's mother had perhaps given her child as a legacy a natural refinement scarcely to be looked for in any person brought up in so unpolished a community.

In short, Nell Blossom's intrinsic worth was no more hidden from the parson than her physical beauty. Her hatred of and disdain for all men had its root in no fault she had committed. Some man, had it been that gambler Hunt had heard called "Dick the Devil?" had disillusioned the child-heart

of Nell Blossom and, perhaps, the sweets of love had turned to ashes in her mouth.

What had become of that gambler? What was the truth about that tragedy at the brink of the canyon wall? Did Tolley know the facts and misstate them? Or was Dick Beckworth really dead and his body swept away by the torrent of Runaway River?

It was plain, Hunt decided, that Dick's disappearance weighed heavily for some cause on Nell Blossom's mind. Something had happened on that spring morning weeks before which had changed Nell from the happy-go-lucky girl the parson knew she must have been to this bitter, disdainful, and apparently wicked woman who scoffed at religion in any form, and especially had "no use for a pulpit-pounder."

In a week he had become imbued with such an interest in Nell that she was the subject most in his thoughts at all hours. He could not eradicate her from his mind, though he tried hard to do so.

In his heart he scarcely supposed that the time would ever come when he might be a suitor for Nell's hand. Joe Hurley stood between them. But the Reverend Willett Ford Hunt was old enough and wise enough to know that whatever came to him in the future, as long as he retained his faculties, Nell Blossom would occupy a niche in his secret heart that no other interest could fill.

Twice at night, when Betty was in bed, Hunt had descended into the lane and, standing at the back of Colorado Brown's place near an open window, listened to Nell sing her songs, even to the caustic one with which she closed her act and in response to which the crowd wildly roared its applause. The verses about the minister's son "went big." But there was a sweetness and power in her singing voice that seemed to reveal the better qualities of the girl in the more tender ballads she sang; for all her numbers were not of a humorous nature. She could bring tears as well as smiles to the faces of her audience with that voice.

Betty came tapping at his door while Hunt was still in his robe. When she saw the dark business suit laid out on the bed she frowned.

"Ford! I did hope you would dress properly on this day," she said.

"I am dressing properly—for Canyon Pass," he returned, smiling. "I am not inclined to attract the hearty laughter and scorn of such members of the community as Boss Tolley, Tom Hicks, and their ilk. Clerical garb might be considered by them as a gratuitous insult. And the last thing I wish to do here is to antagonize the rougher element."

Although Betty failed to see much distinction in the roughness of the community, she did not open that avenue of discussion. She did say decisively:

"Why bother about those awful men, Ford? Tol-

ley and his crowd will never, never be members of your congregation. Maria, Sam's wife, has been giving me the history of those wicked men. She is afraid of her life because of the gang that hangs about the Grub Stake. That is a terrible institution, and everybody in Tolley's employ is bad."

"And yet, Miss Rosabell Pickett, who plays the piano for Tolley, is going to have her own piano trucked over to the meeting room this morning and will play the hymns herself for us. So some good must be found at the Grub Stake," Hunt rejoined, still smiling. "Besides, if they are bad men, I hope to help them."

Cholo Sam was closing the door of his bar and locking it when, later, Hunt and his sister came down from their rooms. Maria, with a jetted jacket, yellow petticoat and reboza, was waiting for her husband.

"Señor Hunt," said the innkeeper, flashing his white teeth as usual, "we honor ourselves to attend your service, if we may? Si?"

"I'll be glad to see you and Maria there, Sam."

Hunt then followed Betty out of the hotel. It had rained since sunrise, but had stopped now. They were early for the service. The street was almost deserted. It had been arranged by Hurley that the whistle of the hoisting engine at the Great Hope should be blown at a quarter to eleven and again

at five minutes of the hour. There was no other means of summoning the Passonians to worship.

There was a roar of voices from the barroom of the Grub Stake as the parson and his sister passed. They crossed the street to avoid a quagmire, but the sound of revelry followed them. It seemed that all the other saloons and stores in sight, including the Three Star Grocery, were somnolent.

Bill Judson joined them as they passed the grocery store. The old man was as solemn as a bishop and as uncomfortable as new shoes, tight light trousers of an ancient fashion, and a stiff-brimmed straw hat could make him.

"Hello! What's the matter with Tolley now?" the storekeeper exclaimed in surprise.

The owner of the Grub Stake had come tearing out of the place, seemingly blinded by rage, and dashed along the street. The group that boiled out of the Grub Stake after him did not follow, but urged him on with jeering laughter.

"What is it?" asked Betty, startled.

"Dunno," said Judson, quickening his stride. "But the feller's up to something."

They were in sight of the meeting room now. The door stood open. When Tolley reached it he plunged in.

Hunt would not leave Betty, but he hurried her on, while Judson almost ran and was over the threshold before them. There was a sudden explo-

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sion of voices inside, Tolley's tones high over all.

"Here's that derved cheater now!" the owner of the place was heard to shout as the storekeeper entered. "Bill Judson! you think you're mighty smart, but you can't put nothing like this over on me."

"What's eatin' on you, Tolley?" was Judson's cool response.

"The boys just told me what you folks was aimin' to use this dump for. I didn't hire it to you for no church. I won't have it, I tell you! This is my shack."

"And I've paid rent for it for six months. What you goin' to do about it?" drawled Judson.

"I'll show you! I won't let no ham-faced old-timer like you make a fool of me."

Hunt reached the door. Betty was almost afraid to enter. There were several men inside and two or three women. Tolley was striding toward the pulpit, swinging his arms and shouting himself hoarse.

"I'll show you!" he shouted. "I own this dump. I'll throw this litter into the street. A church in my shack? Well, I reckon not!"

The distant whistle at the Great Hope pealed its first signal for the service. Several groups of Passonians were visible now, converging toward the place of worship.

"Better cool down, Tolley," advised Judson again. "We don't aim to have any riot yere. This used

to be your honkytonk, and a dirty place it was. But we reckon on running another sort of business in it, and you can't stop us. You're trying to throw sand in the gears o' progress, as the feller said."

"I'll show you what I can do!" shouted Tolley, mounting upon the pulpit platform. He whirled about, and saw Hunt entering the room. "Here's that danged preacher now."

"Mr. Tolley," said the parson clearly, "the wicked have been known to come to the house of God to scoff and have remained to pray. We are going to hold a service here in a quarter of an hour. You are invited to join us. But if you remain, I must ask you to be quiet."

"Why, you derved, white-livered tenderfoot! I'll show you——"

He seized upon Mother Tubbs' big Bible and raised it as though he would fling it upon the ground. Betty gasped. Judson started forward. But Hunt's voice rang loudest through the room.

"Tolley! Put that Book down!"

The compelling tone made the divekeeper pause. He still glared, his face distorted by wrath; but, as Joe Hurley had once said, the fellow after all had not the courage of a rabbit. He really expected Hunt to follow the command with the only show of authority that went in Canyon Pass—the display of a gun!

But the parson had made no threatening gesture. He did not even advance down the room.

"Dang you!" yelled Tolley, and brought the Bible down upon the pulpit with such emphasis that the desk rocked.

The following instant his head was surrounded by a halo of fine particles, the pungency of which was apparent to the surprised spectators almost at once. Tolley received the blast of powdered cayenne full in the face and eyes!

He gasped—choked—sneezed. He sneezed again, a most vociferous roar of sound, quite involuntary and spasmodic. The pepper that had been sprinkled between the leaves of the big book had in one burst pelted Tolley with its fine grains, filling eyes, nose, and his mouth, for that had been open to emit another angry shout.

But now he only shouted for help between sneezes. Tears poured down his face. He staggered blindly down from the pulpit and begged for the open air.

Hunt was first to reach the tortured man and led him forth.

CHAPTER XVI

LOVE AND LONGING

EVEN Hunt could not express sympathy for the unhappy Tolley. But he did not join in Judson's laughter or the chatter of the others in the meeting room. Tolley staggered off toward the Grub Stake, swearing between the huge sneezes which racked him like successive earthquake shocks. Hunt returned inside the building.

The others were grouped near the door, and there were weeping eyes among them. For the moment the atmosphere in the vicinity of the pulpit was unbearable.

Hunt drew forth a handkerchief, tied it across his nose and mouth, and advanced to the desk. The Bible had not been injured by Tolley's rough action. But the red pepper was scattered thickly upon the linen pulpit cloth. He wrapped the book in this cloth and carried it to a window which looked upon the narrow lane beside the building. Hunt opened this window; and, leaning over the low sill, dropped the book to the ground.

He closed that window quickly; but he opened others to ventilate the room. The damp air quickly

relieved the place of the pungent pepper. The parson did all this quietly. He made no comment on the incident.

But the gathering company whispered and chattered—the women angrily, the men more than a little inclined to be amused.

“Parson,” said Bill Judson, his eyes twinkling, “I promised Jib Collins last night that I’d warn you to go easy on pounding the pulpit because it was sort o’ wabbly. I reckon ’twas Tolley I ought t’ve warned.”

Betty explained to the woman who furnished the pulpit cloth why it was not in evidence, and Mother Tubbs when she arrived had to be told why the pulpit Bible was in retirement. But there was time for little more than that, as the second whistle blew, and the room began to fill.

At least an audience was not lacking to hear Hunt preach his first sermon at Canyon Pass. The seats were comfortably filled. Most of the congregation were cleanly and neatly dressed; the women in such finery as they owned. But some of the men, the rougher sort and evidently present out of curiosity only, looked just as they did on week days. Smoking, however, was taboo.

Rosabell Pickett and her piano, a small upright instrument of a rather uncertain tone, was of great assistance. Without her help the strangely awk-

ward congregation could scarcely have raised a hymn.

Hunt made no comment upon the inauguration of the new régime in the town. He conducted the service just as he might have conducted a mission meeting at Ditson Corners. And he preached as carefully thought-out a discourse as was his wont, although his theme was simple. He held their respectful attention and, he believed, won their undivided interest.

After the close of the service the Bible was rescued by two of the women and cleansed of the pepper which had been so plentifully shaken into it. Mother Tubbs took Hunt aside.

"I'm plumb ashamed, parson!" she said indignantly. "To think that Nell Blossom done such a trick on you!"

"Nell Blossom?"

"She done it," said the old woman with conviction. "I missed my box o' red pepper last evening; but I had no idee what that flighty gal took it for. And then she said when I tried to get her to come to meetin' this mornin' that she reckoned it would be too hot up yere for her, and said for me to keep out o' the front seats."

"Ah!"

"She reckoned you'd get to thumping the Book in the middle of the sermon, maybe. When Boss

Tolley hears tell how it come, he won't love Nell none the better, I reckon."

The peppering of the pulpit Bible might have made the whole of Canyon Pass roar with laughter and have brought nothing but ridicule on the parson had Hunt been the actual victim of Nell Blossom's impish trick. That Boss Tolley chanced to suffer yielded a number of the townspeople much amusement. But it afforded others an opportunity to show stronger approval of what Hunt and his coworkers were trying to do.

Then, there was a third party. It was chiefly made up of Boss Tolley's friends. Tolley raved against both Hunt and Nell Blossom, and his satellites listened and agreed with him. There began to be whispered about Canyon Pass a story to the effect that the absent Dick Beckworth would never be seen by mortal eye again, that he had left town in Nell Blossom's company, and that the cabaret singer, if anybody, could explain how Dick's horse had come to be found under a heap of fallen gravel at the edge of Runaway River.

Joe Hurley did not chance to hear these whispers for some time. In truth, during the weeks immediately following that first service in Tolley's old shack, the owner of the Great Hope had found his time fully occupied by two interests. The mine itself was one, for he believed he was close upon the unveiling of that rich vein which he had always be-

lieved was the "mother lode" of his claim. The second interest was in Betty Hunt.

Hurley sought the society of the Eastern girl whenever he could do so. Hunt, who was busy himself in several ways—especially in getting personally acquainted with the people in their homes or where they worked—was glad Joe could devote himself to Betty. Otherwise his sister might have found it very lonely here at Canyon Pass.

The girl from the East allowed Hurley's better qualities to impress her mind more and more. In her company, too, the young man tried to eradicate from his speech the vernacular that he knew she despised. Yet when he grew interested in a subject of conversation, or was excited, it was the most natural thing in the world for Hurley to revert to the vivid expressions of the cattle trail and the camp.

Of course, no man could have prepared himself for college without obtaining a foundation of book education which Betty must fully approve. Occasionally Hurley revealed a flash of wit or a literary appreciation that delighted the girl.

These weeks of association bred in both young people a confidence and admiration for each other which under ordinary conditions might have foretold the growth of a much warmer regard. Hurley began to hope. Yet Betty gave him no such encouragement as young women are wont to offer a

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man in whom they begin to feel a tender interest.

Midsummer was approaching, and the dry, rarified air of Canyon Pass sometimes seemed a blast from an open furnace. But when they rode, as they often did, out upon the heights—above the canyon, for instance—there was always a cooler and more pleasantly odorous breeze.

In one of their earlier rides the two had jogged the entire length of the canyon on the east bank of Runaway River, and even a little way into the desert, far enough to mark the shallow basin where the last trickle of what was at Canyon Pass a boisterous torrent disappeared in the alkali.

But Betty did not admire even the look of the desert country. There was something horrible to her mind in the appearance of the dreary waste. She had never seen the Topaz at sunrise!

When they mounted to the highlands west of the camp, as they did on this present day, there were half a dozen trails they might strike into a country which would reveal beautiful as well as rugged prospects, and to these Betty could grant admiration. She had begun very soon to feel the splendors of nature which were so different here from those of her native Berkshires.

There was a forest that always intrigued her. The trail led them down cathedral aisles to the bank of a murmurous stream. To this they journeyed

to-day; and, when within sound of the river, Betty drew her mount to a stand.

"It is beautiful, Mr. Hurley," she sighed. "I do not wonder that you so love this out-of-door life and this wilderness. And then you have always been used to it. It does make a difference where one is born."

"You said it!" returned Hurley emphatically. "I pretty near stifle when I get into a city and have to stay a spell. When I get back to this I feel like a boy again." He smiled reflectively. "The bard of 'Cactus Center' hits off my feelings to a fare-ye-well," and he proceeded to repeat from "The Forester's Return:"

" 'I'm back on the job by the singing river,
Far from the town with its money-mad,
Back where the quaking aspens quiver—
And I'm glad.

There's work to do and there's work in plenty,
And it's sleep in the open if fate so wills;
But no man is more than one-and-twenty
In the hills.' "

"That is fine!" Betty cried with enthusiasm, her eyes sparkling as they seldom did. "Why, I can almost feel that way myself, sometimes."

There was a drop in her tone at the end. She looked away and, had he been able to see into her eyes then, he would have beheld a much different expression in their dimmed depths.

"You'd feel like it always if you'd just let yourself, Miss Betty," Hurley said, with sudden warmth.

She smiled a little doubtfully, but turned toward him again, having recovered her composure. Joe's eyes glowed and a strange pallor rose under his tan.

"Just think of living out here all your days and enjoying every moment of them! It's rough, I know, and sort of untamed. But it's a good life, Miss Betty—a wonderful life!"

"You—you almost convince me," she stammered, laughing a little uncertainly, yet gazing at him with a dawning light in her eyes that Joe had not seen there before.

It emboldened him; it inspired him to speak the words that were boiling under the surface of his calm. He was a forthright fellow at best, was Joe Hurley, and he was very, very much in love with Betty Hunt.

CHAPTER XVII

A BATTLE IN A GIRL'S HEART

"BETTY, I want to tell you something," he said, unconsciously urging Bouncer nearer to the girl's mount. "These weeks you have been here at Canyon Pass have been the greatest in my life."

The girl looked at him in a startled way.

"This is a big country, it is true. Big things are done out here—great accomplishments achieved—fortunes won. And I have always meant to do my part in it—both as to making money and winning the better things of life for myself. I want to see things that are already started, developed, to watch Canyon Pass grow—in a spiritual as well as a material sense.

"But something else has got hold of me, Betty. I was living a pretty wild life before you and Willie came out here. I wrote him I was. I kind of gloried in being a roughneck, I reckon," he added with a wry smile. "But all that's changed with me now, Betty—since you came."

"Mr. Hurley—Joe!" gasped the girl.

But he raised his hand gently in protest. The gesture asked her to wait—to hear him through.

"I've got another object in life—another reason for working and striving. I reckon a man never does know quite what he's aimin' to do until he sets a mark before him that isn't altogether selfish. I want to get ahead just as much as ever—more so. But I want to accomplish what I'm aimin' at for something higher than just the satisfaction of seeing the Great Hope pay big and know that folks say Joe Hurley has made a ten-strike!"

"You—you will be successful, Joe," she murmured.

"That's up to you, I reckon," the man said abruptly. "I'm aimin' to accomplish all this—winning a fortune, helping to put Canyon Pass on the map, and all—for you, Betty. Just for you."

"Mr. Hurley! Joe! Don't!" the girl suddenly exclaimed.

Her face had grown rosy when she began to understand fully what he was coming to, and then it paled. As she listened to his final outburst the grieved expression that contracted her lips and dimmed her eyes shocked him. Before she could speak he knew what answer he was to receive.

"Don't say anything more—please!" she begged. "It's all wrong. I never thought this—this would happen. Why, I thought we were just friends."

"Betty!" ejaculated the man in a tone that wrung the girl's heart. "Betty, haven't I got a chance with you? I know I'm not worthy——"

"Oh! Oh! Don't put it that way, Joe," she pleaded. "It really isn't that!"

"What's the matter with me then?" he demanded. "Do you want time to think it over? Or—wait! Betty, is—is it because you left some one back East?"

The girl was silent. She turned her head so that he might not see her face. But Hurley waited. She had to answer—and the halting word was uttered as though it were wrenched from her.

"Yes."

Hurley drew in his breath sharply, and then he was likewise silent. A minute dragged by. She stole a glance at him at last. He was staring steadily at her left hand. She had removed her glove, and the hand rested bare upon her pony's neck. Suddenly her face flamed again.

"Oh! I do not wear his—his ring," she said hoarsely. "There—there is a reason. I——"

"I am not prying into your private affairs, Miss Betty," Hurley said quickly. "Only—I am sorry I did not know before. Willie never said a word to warn me."

"He does not know!" ejaculated the girl. "I—I do not want him to know."

"He won't learn it from me. Don't fear," said Hurley rather roughly.

"Oh, Mr. Hurley! I am so—so sorry," whispered the girl.

The man, with drooping shoulders and hanging head, sat his horse, a statue of disappointment. He did not move or look at her, as she wheeled her own mount.

"I—I think I would like to ride back alone, Mr. Hurley. You—you won't mind? Afterward I hope we may be quite as good friends as heretofore. I do appreciate your friendship—Joe."

Betty could not easily miss the way back. The trail was perfectly plain. She rode fast at first, for with all her sorrow for Joe Hurley's disappointment, she could not bear him near her now.

Because she had no thought of ever considering him other than a friend, the girl, who was after all quite inexperienced, had not dreamed Hurley would come to regard her warmly. She could not understand how it had happened. It seemed unbelievable!

Love—romance; a lover—happiness; these things were not for Betty Hunt. She had long ago told herself this. She was devoted to one man only, her brother. And when he would no longer need her, if that time ever came, she expected to follow a lonely trail.

It was not merely Joe Hurley that she could not marry. She could not marry any man.

She came out of the majestic forest and reached the open stretch of the trail from Hoskins. This she followed toward the wagon track which edged the brink of the Overhang. She had brought her

pony to a quieter pace and jogged along, deep in her unhappy thoughts. Suddenly, turning a clump of brush, she quite involuntarily drew in her pony and halted. There was a rider on the trail ahead of her, a stranger.

It was for only a moment that Betty saw him. Horse and rider were plunging down a steep declivity beside the trail into a thick copse. Had he heard her pony and was he seeking to escape observation? The girl was impressed with this possibility.

She rode on again, but very cautiously. She held a firm grip upon her pony's rein. Suppose the stranger should suddenly spur his horse into the trail again and halt her? From the moment her brother had decided to come West, and she knew she must attend him, Betty had been fearful of just such a meeting as she visualized now.

She half turned her mount, tempted to fly back toward the river and Joe. There was something very comforting in the thought of Joe's nearness. Perhaps, if she waited here, he would overtake her. At least, he might come into sight.

Then the thought entered her disturbed mind that possibly Hurley had gone home another way. He knew the country well. He might not follow the only trail she knew by which to reach Canyon Pass.

With this to spur her, the girl urged her mount forward. No use in waiting. The place must be

passed. She could see no movement of the brush where the stranger and his horse had disappeared. But she felt that he was there!

Again she gathered up the pony's reins and held them firmly. She gripped her whip, too, and prepared for a dash. But she continued to walk her horse.

She was on the *qui vive* for a quick start. Her eyes searched the brush in the little ravine. Suddenly she saw something that was not vegetation.

She rode on, but she was more and more disturbed by this object at the edge of the brush. Then, of a sudden, she realized what it was. It was the upper part of a man's face. The hatbrim covered all his hair and cut off much of his forehead; a branch hid all below the point of his nose.

And yet this patch of face shocked Betty. It seemed that she recognized it! Was it—could it be——

The blood pounded in her temples; her eyes were suffused. At that moment she could not have spurred her pony had the lurker in the brush sprung forth into her path!

Then he moved. She gained a clear glimpse of his entire face before he dodged again out of sight. His hair rolled upon the collar of his shirt and he wore a mustache, but no beard. Betty felt sudden relief.

"It is never Wilkenson—never!" she murmured. "Never him!"

She knew that her terror had been born in her own mind rather than of any external danger. The man was nothing to her—no one she had ever seen. She rode on finally with a sudden access of courage—a feeling that often comes to one when a peril has been successfully surmounted.

Indeed when, a little later and in sight of the broader wagon-track, she heard the pattering hoofs behind her she was not startled. At first she thought it was Joe Hurley. Then she recognized the fact that there was more than one horse coming. Even at that she felt confidence.

She turned to look, and saw three roughly dressed fellows pounding along the trail on tired and sweating steeds. One of the men had an authoritative air. It was he who addressed her, sweeping off his hat in the same way that Joe Hurley was wont to offer greeting.

"I say, miss," said the man, "have you seen a feller riding this yere way—couldn't be long ago? Mebbe an hour?"

"What—what man?" she hesitated. "I rode along here some time ago with Mr. Joe Hurley——"

"Shucks, ma'am! I ain't after him," replied the man. "I know Joe mighty well. And if you are a friend of his, you pass. I'm the sheriff of Cactus County, and me and my deputies are after a yaller

hound that bamfoozled some honest men out of their hard earnings. He's got the gold, and we want both him and it! We been trailing him two days."

Betty trembled so inwardly that she could say nothing; but luckily the sheriff did not consider there was anything she could say.

"If you and Joe Hurley come along from Canyon Pass, you'd have seen this feller, if he'd gone that way. And I'm mighty sure he wouldn't aim for the Pass. I reckon, boys, Lamberton is our best bet. Good-day to ye, ma'am."

He removed his hat again, and the other two did the same. But they did not ride south at the fork of the trail without casting back more than one admiring glance at the trim figure and quietly beautiful face of Betty Hunt.

She cantered away on the Canyon Pass trail. She had something else to think of now. By keeping silent had she aided a thief to escape the hands of justice? But, then, perhaps she had saved a man's life as well!

CHAPTER XVIII

THE SHADOW ON BETTY'S PATH

It was still a beautiful summer morning, but its charm was quite lost for Betty Hunt. Her appreciation of the beautiful in nature was submerged by what had so overwhelmed her heart and her thought.

The thing which had been so long hidden in her mind—that secret which had changed Betty so desperately at the end of her schooldays—had risen to the surface again.

But she had not gone far when something arose that made Betty wish she had not left Joe Hurley beside the singing river. Her staid old pony began to limp.

She was a good rider, but she had not the first idea what to do when a horse went lame, except to get down and relieve the poor creature of her weight. But she was much too far from Canyon Pass to walk and lead the hobbling pony.

The wise old cow pony made much of the affliction, and when Betty tried to urge it on the limping horse was a pitiful sight indeed. Betty had never been taught the proper way to pick up a horse's foot

to examine it for a stone in the frog; but the pony lifted the crippled member in such a way that the girl managed to get at it. The stone was there, a sharp-edged flint wedged into the frog, but the girl had no instrument with which to get it out.

Fortuitous circumstances do happen elsewhere besides in bald romance. Unlooked-for help appeared in this moment of Betty's need. She looked up to see Nell Blossom on her cream-colored pony galloping along the wagon track, coming from the direction of Canyon Pass. The cabaret singer glanced at the dismounted girl, nodded, and would have gone right by, but she chanced to see the pony limp on a yard or two.

"What's the matter with that hoss?" demanded Nell, reining in her own pony with both skill and promptness.

"Oh, Miss Blossom," cried Betty, "there's a stone in his foot, and I can't get it out."

"Where's your side partner?" asked Nell, getting slowly down. "That Joe Hurley oughtn't to let you tenderfoots out of his sight. Not on the open trail."

Betty recognized the measure of scorn in this remark, but she was in no position to resent it. She said as casually as she could:

"Mr. Hurley stayed behind for something. He may not even come back this way. I really do not know what to do for the poor creature."

"Meanin' Joe, or the hoss?" and the blue eyes danced suddenly with mischief.

"The poor pony."

"Get the stone out," Nell said, picking up the pony's foot.

"It is wedged in tightly—that stone."

Nell drew from the pocket of her abbreviated skirt a jackknife that would have delighted the heart of any boy. With an implement in this she removed the stone in a twinkling.

"There!" Nell said. "Let him rest here a minute, and he'll be all right. The old four-flusher! He isn't hurt a mite, but he'd like to have you think so," and she slapped the pony resoundingly.

"I'm awfully much obliged to you, Miss Blossom."

"No need to be. And no need to call me 'Miss.' "

"Oh—well—Nell, if you like it better," Betty rejoined with a most disarming smile. "I thank you."

"That's all right," said Nell in her brusque, but not altogether unfriendly, way. "I say, Miss Hunt!"

Betty interrupted with: "Betty, if you please, Nell."

"Oh! All right," the singer said, the more friendly light sparkling in her eyes again. "What I wanted to ask you is, is that suit you got on really what they all wear in the East?"

"Yes. Since nearly every one rides astride now, the habit is made mannish."

"Well, I've straddled a hoss ever since I can remember, but I never seen anything but a skirt and bloomers or a divided skirt like this on women before. But I must say them things you wear are plumb fetching."

Betty was amused. But she had reason for feeling kindly toward Nell Blossom.

"You could easily cut over that corduroy skirt you wear into a pair of breeches like these," she suggested.

"You reckon so?" asked Nell with eagerness. "I'd like that a pile. But I don't know——"

"I could show you. We could cut a pattern. Has anybody in town a sewing machine?"

"Sure thing. Mother Tubbs has got one. And I can run up a seam as good as she can."

"I'll tell you," proposed Betty with real interest. "You ride back to the hotel with me, and we'll cut the pattern out of a newspaper."

Through such seemingly unimportant incidents as this the trend of great affairs are sometimes changed. Had Nell ridden on she might have seen the same fugitive Betty had noticed hiding in the chaparral. But Nell was easily persuaded to attend the parson's sister to the Wild Rose.

The two girls, who seemed to have so little in common, after all found much, besides the dress-making plans, in each other to afford them interest.

It was Nell's strangely sweet voice that pleased Betty most. Even when the Western girl said the rudest things, her voice caressed one's ear. And Betty began to realize that Nell's "rudeness" was born of frankness and a certain bashfulness. Most bashful people are abrupt, at times quite startling, in speech. In another place, among other people, Nell Blossom would have betrayed timidity and hesitation. But, as she would have said, she would not have "got far" in Canyon Pass by yielding to any secret shrinking from her associates.

"A girl's got to keep her own end up in a place like this. They all root for me and clap me on and off the stage. But I've got to fight my own battles," pursued the singer. "Men are like wolves, Betty. The pack will follow a leader so long as that leader keeps ahead. When the leader goes plumb lame and falls behind, they eat him."

"Oh!"

"I'm popular with the boys. They're strong for me just now. But 'twouldn't take much to make 'em turn on me. I know 'em!" she concluded grimly.

She knew a great many things, it was evident, of which Betty Hunt was ignorant. When the cabaret singer went away with her pattern she left Betty much to ponder about, which did not fundamentally deal with Nell Blossom's problems.

When Nell had gone a grimmer shadow overcame Betty's mind—a shadow that had lain athwart

her path since that bitter season just preceding the death of her Aunt Prudence Mason and Betty's withdrawal from boarding school.

The events of those last weeks at Grandhampton Hall were etched so deeply upon Betty's memory that they could not be effaced. She believed that they never would be.

And on this day all had been rubbed raw again by Joe Hurley's outbreak. If he had only not spoken as he had! If things had only gone on between Betty and him as they had been going—calmly, quietly; yes, she confessed it now, really pleasantly.

She had come to think of the mining man's attention as an undoubted aid to her placid life. Her rides with him, and their association in other ways, their conversations on various subjects had been of greater moment in establishing her peace of mind than Betty had realized.

She faced that fact—alone in her own room now—with fuller appreciation of what Joe Hurley had come to mean to her.

She was an utterly honest girl. She had faced a terrible and soul-racking situation before and come to a decision which she had held to through all the months since she had left school.

Just what did Joe Hurley mean to Betty Hunt?

Her first half-fear of Joe, a real dislike of his presumed character, had melted before a broader understanding of the man and his aims. Joe was

her brother's friend and the chief supporter of Hunt's earnest work among these people. First of all Betty had begun to like Joe because he so generously aided the parson.

Her appreciation of the underlying strata of Joe's character had grown from day to day of personal association with him. He was a man who would ultimately achieve big things. She felt this to be his dominant trait. Yet he had tenderness, generosity, wit, and a measure of "book learning" of which last she eagerly approved.

Under ordinary conditions—Betty Hunt admitted this frankly now—she would have been as strongly attracted by Joe Hurley, once she had got over her first doubt of his surface qualities, as by any young man she had ever associated with.

She did not question her own judgment in Joe's case, no matter how far wrong the unsophisticated school girl had been to give her heart into the keeping of another who had seemed a much more charming man!

Andy Wilkenson—sophisticated, smiling, tender, with all the graces of person and intellect that any young girl could wish—had set himself to win Betty Hunt. His intentions had been perfectly honorable, in the sense thus used.

Andy had urged marriage—an immediate, if secret, marriage—from the very first. And there was reason for secrecy. Betty wished to finish her course

at Grandhampton Hall. Aunt Prudence must not know of this great, new thing that had come into Betty's life. Even Ford must not be told.

For, after all, the girl realized that she was very young—much younger, even, it seemed, than Andy Wilkenson. Andy was so much more sensible than she!

Betty feared she could not keep her mind sufficiently on her studies to stand well at the end of the semester if she was not utterly sure of Andy. Once married to him, of course, Andy would be hers entirely! No other woman could ever mean anything to him if the unsuspecting, broken-down old minister in a neighboring town joined them in holy bonds.

Aunt Prudence would forgive her when it was all over and she went home with her diploma and her marriage certificate in her trunk. It would be absolutely wicked to disturb poor Aunt Prudence by a letter either announcing the engagement, which was for a very brief term, or her marriage. For Betty's elderly relative was ill—worse than either Betty or her brother dreamed of at the time.

The opportunities Betty had to be with Andy were not many. The rules of the Hall were very strict. Even her introduction to the young man from the West had been clandestine. Unknown to Betty, Wilkenson, learning all he could about certain

girls in her set at the school, had selected Betty Hunt deliberately as his mark.

Betty's school fees were paid by an old aunt who was reputed very rich. The aunt was known to be devoted to her. All that she had was sure to be Betty's when Aunt Prudence died. Wilkenson had even gone so far as to learn much more particularly about the state of Aunt Prudence Mason's health than Betty herself knew.

One item only escaped Andy Wilkenson's cunning mind. It was not until they had been married and Wilkenson was driving Betty back to the Hall by unfrequented roads late in the afternoon that the small but appalling oversight on his part broke upon his understanding.

"You know, girly, I haven't got much money. I came East yere"—how Betty had loved that drawl then—"to get me a stake. I did a fool thing and threw away—just threw away—my bank roll out in Crescent City."

"Oh, *money*!" replied Betty with fine scorn. "You can go to work at something, Andy, and earn more."

"Ye-as," he agreed in a tone that might have revealed a good deal to a more sophisticated person than the girl who had so recently been Betty Hunt, "so I can. But I may not make any good connection before you get out of that school. And then I'd like us to go back West. I'm known out there. A

man can always do better in his own stamping-grounds."

"Oh, the West must be wonderful," murmured Betty, with clasped hands.

"Yep. But no place is wonderful unless you've got a good stake. Now, how about it, Betty? This old aunt of yours is pretty well fixed, eh?"

The girl was startled. "Wealthy? I think so. Aunt Prudence has been very kind to me."

"She'll keep on being kind to you, I reckon?"

"Of course! The dear soul. You'll just love her, Andy."

"Maybe. But I don't think I'll risk trying her out. Not just yet. She's pretty sick, anyway, isn't she?"

Betty told him that Aunt Prudence was feeble. The girl did not know at that time how serious the woman's malady was. Only on the day following did the telegram come recalling her to Amberly!

"Anyway," Wilkenson observed, after some thought, "you're her heir, Betty." For a second time the girl was startled by his speech. She began to peer at him now in the dusk in a puzzled fashion.

"What I'm aimin' at," said Wilkenson quite calmly, "is that we'd better keep all this quiet until Auntie goes over the divide. No use stirring up possible objections. She'll leave you her money, you say. We'll take that money and go back West. I know a place I can buy in Crescent City that will

pay big returns. I will let the pasteboards alone, myself. I always get foolish if I deal 'em wild instead of for the house. We'll cut a swath out there, Betty, that'll make 'em sit up and take notice. Sure thing!"

"Andy! What are you talking about?" asked the incredulous girl. "Auntie's money—— It's all invested. I know it is. It's tied up."

"Shucks! we can untie it," and Wilkenson laughed. "No banker's knots mean much to me. And four or five per cent. interest ain't a patch on what I'll make for you when we get to going."

"But, Andy," she said weakly, "I know all about Auntie's will. I have even read it. She made it years ago when Ford and I were little. And she is a woman who never changes her mind. Ford has papa's little fortune. Aunt Prudence gives me her property; but I can spend only the income from it until I am thirty."

"What's that?" His tone made her jump. "Thirty?" Then he thought. "Well, shucks, honey," he drawled, "you're a married woman now. That makes you practically of age in this State, and the courts——"

"It makes no difference, Andy. The will is made that way for that very purpose," the girl said frankly.

"For what purpose?"

"So that—that my husband cannot touch the principal. Until I am thirty I cannot touch it myself."

An oath—a foul, blistering expression—parted the man's lips. In the deepening gloom of the evening she could see his face change to a mask of indignant disappointment. She did not shrink from him. She did not plead with him. In that dragging minute, Andy had stopped the car with a jerk, Betty understood everything about this Westerner. And from that instant had germinated and grown all the hatred and fear of the West and its people that Betty Hunt had betrayed when first her brother had suggested the journey to Canyon Pass.

She had stepped out of the car. She had torn in small pieces the paper the old minister had given her. She had drawn from her finger the plain band Wilkenson had placed upon it, which she must have hidden in any case, and thrown it from her into the bushes beside the way.

Then Betty Hunt had commanded Andrew Wilkenson never to speak to her again—never to try to see, write, or otherwise communicate with her. She walked away from him. She heard the roar of the engine after a moment and knew he turned the car and drove away.

And that had been the end of Betty's romance. She had not seen the Westerner again.

CHAPTER XIX

A GOOD DEAL OF A MAN

DURING the ensuing weeks the cabaret singer went often to see Betty at the hotel. They even rode together, for Joe Hurley suddenly became so busy at the Great Hope Mine that he was forced to excuse himself, so he said, from accompanying the Eastern girl on those pleasant jaunts which both had so enjoyed.

The two girls actually enjoyed each other's society and found more than a riding habit in which to feel a mutual interest. The friendship grew out of a hunger in the hearts of both Nell and Betty.

The parson did not make a third in their rambles, nor was he often in sight when Nell called on Betty. The latter would not have encouraged any intimacy between the mining-camp girl and Hunt under any circumstances. She did not dream that her brother felt more than passing interest in the half-wild Nell.

The latter never attended the services held in Tolley's old dance hall. But the Passonians in general came to accept the religious exercises as an institution and supported them fairly in point of contributions and attendance. There was yet, however,

strong opposition to the parson and his work. Nor did it all center around Boss Tolley.

Nell, soon after the beginning of her acquaintance with Betty, stopped singing "This Is No Place for a Minister's Son" and took up no other ditty aimed in any particular at the Reverend Willet Ford Hunt and his work.

As for Hunt himself, he went forward, accepting both praise and blame with equal equanimity. But he began to be worried secretly about Joe Hurley.

Hunt supplemented the morning preaching with a Sunday school in the afternoon and a general service in the evening, at which he usually gave a helpful talk on more secular lines than his morning sermon.

Hunt would have been glad to have had more and better singing; but although Rosabell Pickett did her best, the song service was far from satisfactory. The parson never passed Colorado Brown's place in the evening and heard Nell's sweet voice that he was not covetous. He would never be satisfied—but he whispered this not even to Betty—until he heard that voice leading his congregation in the meeting room.

The rougher element that had at first attended the meetings mainly out of curiosity soon drifted away.

Hunt was not, however, above carrying his work out into the highways and byways of the town. If the men would not come to his services, he carried a measure of his helpful efforts to them. He did

more than visit the homes of Canyon Pass. He went, especially at the noon hour, to where the men were at work.

Hunt never made himself offensive. He did not join the workmen at the mines or washings as a parson, but as another man, interested in their labor and in themselves.

Once a mule-drawn ore wagon broke down on the road to the ore-crushers. It blocked the way of other teams. The parson took off his coat, helped raise the wagon-body so the axle could be blocked, and aided in getting on another wheel in place of the broken one.

A man working alone in a ditch some distance from the Oreode was so unfortunate as to bring a rock down and get caught by the leg. His shouts for help were first heard by Hunt, who was striding along the wagon track. Without other aid the parson pried up the rock and drew the man out from under it. Then he carried the fellow, with his lacerated leg, to his shack, where he lived with his partner; and between the partner and Hunt the injured man was nursed as long as he needed attention at all.

This incident was the spark that started the idea of the hospital for Canyon Pass in Hunt's mind. He began to talk hospital to everybody, even to Slickpenny Norris. The banker threw up his hands and began to squeal at last.

"That's just it! That's just it!" he cried. "I knew one thing would lead to another if a parson come into this town. I told that crazy Joe Hurley so. He had no business ever to have brought you here."

"What has my coming to Canyon Pass got to do with it?" Hunt asked mildly. "The need of a hospital—there are always accidents happening at the mines—was here long before I came. If a man is hurt badly he dies before help can get here. Doctor Peterby is no surgeon—and you know, Mr. Norris, he is not always to be trusted. This towns needs a place where an injured man can get surgical treatment and proper nursing."

"I don't see why," muttered Norris. "We were getting along quite well enough before you butted in."

Hurley, however, agreed with his friend. In spite of the fact that he seemed to have "fallen from grace" a good bit, the owner of the Great Hope was strong for all secular improvement of the town, whatever may have been his private emotions regarding the religion that Hunt represented. The movement for a hospital took form and grew.

It was not these things, however, that endeared Hunt to the hearts of the rougher element of Canyon Pass. And in time—and that before fall—some of the toughest hard-rock men and muckers working in

the mines and at the Eureka Washings openly praised the Reverend Willett Ford Hunt.

Hunt one noon had given the men who gathered in a quiet place to eat their lunches a little talk on first aid to the injured. He had sent to Denver for several first-aid kits and was now going about from mine to mine explaining the more important uses of the articles in the box.

The men understood the helpfulness of this. Neglected wounds meant blood-poisoning, one of the most painful scourges a prospector or miner working far beyond the reach of surgeon and hospital, can have. It was well to know, too, how to make a proper tourniquet, and how to lay a bandage so that it would hold well.

The whistle blew and the great engine was started. The men drifted away to their several jobs. There were three pipes at work tearing down the bank on the upper bench at the Eureka Washings, and others below. The force of the water thrown from the nozzles of these pipes rocked the mighty hydraulic "guns" and caused the men astride of them to hold on with both hands. It took a husky fellow to guide that stream spouting from between his knees.

Hunt had returned the kit to the superintendent's office and climbed to the upper bench, intending to go over the highland to the Great Hope Mine, which was nearer the West Fork River. Hi Brownell, who straddled the middle gun up here, risked wav-

ing a cordial hand at the parson when he saw the latter departing. The noise of the hurtling streams drowned Hi's voice, of course.

Just as Hunt returned a smiling salute to the young fellow—one in whom the parson was deeply interested, for Hi was really a worth-while boy—the accident happened that was fated to mark this day as one long to be remembered at Canyon Pass. Incidentally the occasion, more than any other one thing, brought about the establishment of the new hospital.

The whine and splash of the streams of water drowned most other sounds. But of a sudden, as Hunt was turning his back on the scene, he heard a sharp crack—a sound that would have penetrated the thunderous rumble of a railroad train.

Hunt wheeled. He saw Hi Brownell thrown high into the air as though from a viciously bucking broncho, come down sprawling, and the savage stream from his pipe strike the man and carry him, as though he were a leaf on a torrent, into the cavity in the bank, against which the nozzle of the pipe was aimed.

The flapping limbs and struggling torso of Brownell were visible for a moment only; then down upon the spot roared soil, gravel, and larger stones, of which the bank's strata were built.

Unguided, the shooting stream from the gun swept first one way along the bench, then the other.

It corrugated the face of the bank deeply for yards in either direction. For a moment Hunt saw again the struggling body of the injured man at the edge of the fallen rubble. Then came another slide to cover it completely!

The broken hydraulic gun fell over on its side. The parting of some section of it was what had thrown Brownell into the air and into the path of its stream.

But before the other gunners on the bench who saw Brownell's accident could shut off their streams, Hunt had acted. Some muckers tried to run in to seize Brownell or dig him out from under the gravel that had fallen, but the stream from the writhing pipe swept them aside like chips. Half a dozen were rolling in the mud of the bench.

Hunt sprang directly for the seat of the trouble. That hose-pipe had to be controlled before a thing could be done to help the buried Brownell. Precious moments were lost signaling to the engineer below to shut off power.

Hunt had not played football on his college team for nothing. He made an extremely low "tackle," for he went down on his knees and then slid along through the mud to grapple with the writhing pipe that had broken away from its fastenings. He got hold of it and wrestled with it for a few seconds as two men might wrestle on the mat. When the other men came running from below Hunt had conquered

the formidable thing, and the stream was shooting into the air, where all the harm it did was to shower some of the men as it fell back to earth.

For thirty seconds or more he held it so, until the stream was shut off below. The others ran for the pile that had overwhelmed Brownell. They dug into it with their bare hands, got hold of one leg, and dragged him forth like a wet rag out of a pan of dishwater!

He was alive; nor were there many bones broken. But he was a terrible sight, and they had to work over him for some minutes before he breathed again. Hunt went at this task, too, as coolly as did the superintendent. That first-aid kit came in very handily at this juncture.

The men stood around for a little while and watched and talked. The accident had come near being a tragedy.

"Believe me," said one rough fellow, "that parson is a good deal of a man. I'm for him, strong!"

"You'd even go to church for him, would you, Jack?" chuckled his mate.

"Church? I'd go to a hotter place than that for him!" was the prompt and emphatic reply,

CHAPTER XX

MURDER WILL OUT

JOE HURLEY had lost none of his admiration for his college friend whom he had encouraged to come West. He still believed the Reverend Willett Ford Hunt was the very man to find the heart of Canyon Pass. Nor did events as they developed disprove his pre-judgment of the result of Hunt's coming.

But it must be confessed a sour note had come into the life of the owner of the Great Hope. He was a worker; he was energetic; he never under any circumstances neglected business—not even when he had been most attentive to Betty Hunt. But he now had little joy in his work and looked for recreation to a means he had eschewed for the most part since the Easterners had arrived.

Like most men of his class and upbringing, the ex-cow-puncher found satisfaction for a certain daring trait in his character at the gambling table. The coarser forms of pleasure in the honkytonks did not attract Joe Hurley. He danced occasionally with the better class of girls; he never drank more than he thought was good for him—and he carried his drink well; but when he “sat in” at a game of stud

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poker or went up against the wheel—roulette was popular with the Passonians—he admitted in his saner moments that he “didn’t know when he had enough.” The wild streak in the fellow showed through the veneer of repression as it had when he was in college.

Hunt could not feel as lenient now toward these escapades as he once had. Not alone had the Easterner’s outlook on life become more serious; but after five years Joe Hurley, he thought, should have “grown up.” He was, however, too wise to utter a single word in opposition to Joe’s renewed course in moral retrogression. He took Sam Tubbs to task when he met that old reprobate staggering home from the saloons and gave him a tongue-lashing that Sam admitted afterward made his wife’s nagging seem like a cradle lullaby. Hunt faced down Slickpenny Norris on the open street, to the delight of the bystanders, over the banker’s niggardliness in opposing the building and equipment of the hospital. The parson had been known to seize upon two well-grown young fellows fighting in a vacant lot to the delight of their fellows, knock their heads together resoundingly and send each home “with a flea in his ear.” But he had not a word of admonition it seemed for Joe Hurley.

Yet Hunt was troubled about his friend. He feared Betty knew something about the reason for the change in the mine owner. But here again he

was silent. He knew his sister well—too well to try to gain her confidence on any matter which she would not give gratuitously.

Hunt had been much too busy at the time when Hurley began to withdraw from Betty's companionship to notice the gradual drifting apart of the two. When the brother awoke to the fact that his friend and his sister seemed to be mere acquaintances again, Betty had found a close companion in Nell Blossom.

Under certain circumstances this latter fact might have encouraged Hunt to consider his own influence with Nell as increasing; but by this time he had gained more than a casual acquaintance with the cabaret singer's character. Joe Hurley had not written too strongly about Nell's stubbornness. Hunt had undertaken in several ways to break down the wall the girl had raised between them. She fought him off with all the vigor of a wildcat and without much more politeness than one of those felines would have shown.

He met her at Mother Tubbs—not by intention; but he was rather frequently there to confer with the uncultured but very sensible old woman. Nell snubbed him, or scorned him, or was downright impudent to him, just as her mood chanced to be. He had to warn the old woman to pay no attention to the girl's attitude or there would have been a flare-up between the two. And Hunt very well knew that

while Nell lived with Mother Tubbs she was pretty safe.

He heartily approved, too, of her intimacy with Betty. He could not gauge the influence Betty was having on the self-willed girl; but he had confidence in his sister, and he knew Nell would only be helped by the association and that Betty would not be injured.

The opposition of Boss Tolley and his gang was the last thing to trouble the placidity of Parson Hunt's soul. They snapped and barked, but had as yet come to no close-quarters since Tolley's adventure with the pepper-besprinkled Bible. That tale had convulsed the Passonians with mirth, and even when weeks later it was retold, it brought ready laughs from the citizens.

It was now fall, a golden-and-red autumn that enthralled the visitors from the East when they looked abroad to the hills of a morning. Even Betty confessed that the glories of the Berkshires at the same season were surpassed by this sight. She had come now to appreciate the rude and bold lines of the mountains and the gaudy color schemes of frost-bitten shrubbery intermixed with the emerald of the *Coniferæ*.

The early brightening of the face of nature by these autumnal tints foretold for the natives of Canyon Pass an early winter. To make this assurance doubly sure, old Steve Siebert and Andy McCann

came wandering back to the Pass weeks ahead of their scheduled time.

It was a fair enough day when the two old prospectors came in—McCann in the morning and Siebert along toward night. In all the time they had been absent, after getting out of the canyon itself, they had not been in sight of each other. One had prospected east of the Runaway, and the other west. Their activities in fact had been at least a hundred miles apart. But both had seen signs—unmistakable signs—of approaching winter.

They met as usual the amused inquiries of the Passonians regarding the "ten-strike" they had been expected to make. Was there due to be a stampede for the scene of the claims they had staked out? Had they brought in samples of the "real stuff" that would start a regular Cripple Creek boom somewhere out in the Topaz?

The two old men grinned, their watery eyes blinking, and "stood the gaff" as patiently as they always did. Why did they spend half the year in the ungodly loneliness of the desert places, and in the end bring nothing back with them? Not even an additional coating of tan, for their leathery faces and hands were already so darkened that the sun and wind had no effect upon them.

"You old duffers ain't right in your minds," said Judson to Andy McCann. "Just as loco as you can

be. Ye never did make a strike and ye never will——”

“Lots you know about it, Bill,” grumbled McCann, his jaws moving stiffly.

“Well, you never did, did you?” demanded the storekeeper, with twinkling eyes.

“If you were yere twenty years ago——”

“You know derved well I was, Andy,” put in Judson. “Reckon I was. And before.”

“You recommember the flood then?”

“I ain’t lost my mem’ry,” muttered Judson.

“All right. Keep *that* in yer mind,” said Andy, shaking his head in senile fashion. “There was a discovery made that year that you—nor nobody else in Canyon Pass—knowed anything about. Talk about the mother lode! Well!”

“Is that so?” cried the storekeeper eagerly. “Then why wasn’t it worked? I knowed you and Steve brought in samples of the right stuff; but——”

“Steve,” snarled McCann, his whole manner changing. “That derved rat? Him? He didn’t have no more to do with findin’ that vein——Huh! Huh!” He coughed, fell silent, went out of the store, deaf to any further questions.

It was Joe Hurley, standing with Hunt on Main Street, who was first to welcome Steve Siebert as he came along, riding his lean mare and towing the burro that looked as though it might have been carved rudely out of desert rock.

"Well, old-timer, I certainly am glad to see you," the mining man said. "What luck?"

"Oh, so-so," croaked the prospector.

"Ain't going to tell us you worked all summer just to get free air?" and Joe chuckled.

"Sumpin' like it," replied Siebert, and grinned toothlessly.

"You do beat my time! Goin' to come over to the Great Hope? There's a job for you."

"Mighty nice of you, Joe. I'll come," said the old man, nodding.

"And not a darn thing to show for all your pickin' and smellin' about the Topaz since spring?"

"Not what you'd call a bonanza."

"Youbetcha!" ejaculated Hurley. He turned with a grin to Hunt. "Meet Parson Hunt, Steve. We've done more in the Pass this summer than you have on the desert. We've got us a real parson, and we're aimin' to have a sure-enough church."

"That's a good word," agreed Steve solemnly, leaning to shake Hunt's hand. The old man's palm was as dry and scaly as a lizard's back. "There's a heap o' folks yere that need religion. I understand that derved Andy McCann's got back."

The gibe was obvious. Joe grinned with appreciation.

"Yep," he said. "And he hasn't got any more to show for his summer's work than you have."

"Him!" snarled Steve. "Of course he ain't.

That dumb-head wouldn't find gold in the mint. No, sir! Never did find any——"

"I thought he did make a ten-strike once, but that the slide twenty years ago knocked his claim into a cocked-hat?"

"What? Him? Does he say so?" ejaculated Siebert, his wrinkled, tanned countenance flaming angrily.

"I heard tell," and Joe chuckled.

"He's a plumb liar. He didn't find any such thing. If there was any such discovery made in them days, it was me that done it. Youbetcha! But *him*! Huh! Anyway, it's all buried deeper 'n the Pit—take it from me," and, grumbling, Steve Siebert rode on.

"Believe me, Willie," said Hurley, "there's a case for you. Try to get those two together."

"These two old men are enemies?" asked Hunt quietly.

"That's no name for it. They hate each other as only two fellers can who once were the closest friends. Old Steve and Andy were once as close as twins. But they tell me for twenty years they have been snarling at and back-biting each other something scandalous. If you want to introduce love and kindness into the hearts of Canyon Pass folks, Willie, just give those two old ruffians a whirl."

He laughed—not the kind of laugh he would have

uttered some weeks before. There was a sneering note in Joe Hurley's voice now when he spoke of Hunt's work and the better things of life. The parson noted it now as he had often noticed it of late, but he said nothing in comment at this time. He merely observed, before separating from Joe to return to the hotel for supper :

"Drop into the meeting room to-night, Joe. You haven't shown much interest in the Men's Club lately, and the work should have your approval. Besides, there are certain business matters that must be discussed at once."

"Well," said Joe gruffly.

He did not promise to attend. He did not attend.

"I wonder what kept Joe away?" Hunt ventured to Judson, as they, the last of the company, left the meeting room and the parson locked the door. That was never left unlocked since Nell Blossom's trick with Mother Tubbs' Bible. "I expected him to-night to give us his views on that matter."

The old storekeeper turned to him and grinned. "Joe's mighty busy, I reckon," he said.

"In the evening?"

"This evening, you betcha!"

"In just what way, Judson? What's up your sleeve?"

"My funnybone," chuckled the storekeeper. "And I have to laugh. Just about once in so often Joe

seems to lose ev'ry mite of sense he was born with. He thinks he can beat the man that got the first patent out on stud poker."

"Ah! I know Joe used to like cards. When he was East. But now—— Is it as bad as you intimate, Judson?"

"Some worse, I'm free to say," declared the old man. "Joe's gone up against Colorado Brown's dealer, Miguel, several times lately. They get up a round game of a few fellers—all friends. But Miguel is always playin' for the house. He's a wonder. 'Last Card Mike' they sometimes call him. He seems to be able to read clean through the backs of any pack o' cards you put up to him. He's a wizard—no mistake."

"You mean that Joe is losing money in this game?" asked Hunt, with some apprehension.

"Me, I'd just as soon bet on flies with their shoes stuck in molasses as to play stud. Youbetcha!" returned Judson, with a chuckle.

Hunt separated from the storekeeper and walked slowly toward the Wild Rose. He passed Colorado's place; then he turned back. It is a matter of much moment for one man to interfere in another's private affairs, and no one realized this fact better than the Reverend Willett Ford Hunt. His office could not excuse any unasked advice or intervention in Hurley's chosen course, no matter how much Hunt desired to restrain his friend.

He hesitated again when he faced the swinging doors. There was not much noise inside. This was not a Saturday night and the amusement places along Main Street were not crowded. Most of the Passonians who wasted their money in the several places of this character spent it all and spent it quick. The mid-week nights were lean for the dive keepers.

It was not lack of courage that restrained Mr. Hunt from preaching a general revival and a bitter war against the cohorts of the devil in this town. Merely, the time was not yet ripe. Sometimes he feared that it never would be ripe. Certainly he had not yet reached the heart of Canyon Pass. Since the first shack had been built here at the junction of the two forks, the enemy had been in power; and it was now well entrenched.

But to-night Hunt was impressed by the feeling that his friend needed him. Joe was slipping away from him. For some unexplained reason the very man who had brought him here to the Pass and coaxed the idea of a spiritual uplift of the place into germination, was backsliding.

The parson began to feel that he could not stand by and see this thing go on. He pushed through the flaps of the door. He had seldom entered this, or any of the other saloons, in the evening.

His entrance now, however, did not serve to startle any of the habitués. Brown himself came

forward to shake hands with the parson. Some of the players at the green-covered tables nodded to Hunt. The three-piece orchestra in the dance hall at the back was droning out a fox-trot. Nell was not singing. The principal interest seemed to be about a corner table at which the parson saw Joe Hurley sitting.

After a word to Brown in greeting, the parson walked over to this corner table and joined the group standing about it. Hurley looked up, grinned, and said:

"Hullo, Willie! Want me?"

"I've something to ask you—by and by, when you are done."

"Looks like an all-night session," returned Hurley, immediately giving his attention to the cards again. "Mike, here, is trying to skin me alive and the sheep is bleatin'. Deal 'em, Mike."

Hunt said nothing more; but he remained. By the grim set of Joe's lips and the silence of the company about the table, he knew that the moment was unpropitious for any insistence on his part that his friend give him his attention. Yet he had the feeling that something was going to happen, that his place was here at this gambling table rather than at the hotel with Betty.

The event that he subconsciously expected, however, came from outside. There was a sudden clamor at the door, the flaps swung in sharply, and

several men entered. Smithy, Judson's gangling young clerk, was the most noticeable member of the new group. He had a cut over his right eye, a puff on his cheek-bone that could have been made by nothing but a heavy fist, and when he spoke a crimson gap in his upper jaw betrayed the absence of two teeth.

"What's happened to you, Smithy?" demanded Colorado Brown, coming forward quickly. It would not be to the benefit of the house to have the gamblers disturbed at this moment. "Somebody punch you?"

"I'll thay they did!" lisped Smithy. He was half sobbing, but he was mad clear through.

"They didn't improve your looks none," said Colorado.

"Never mind muh lookth," said Smithy. "I want to know what you fellers think of this?"

"I just told you. Whoever done it didn't make you any handsomer," interposed the proprietor of the hall. "Now, if you've had a fight outside, don't bring it in here. We're plumb peaceable here to-night, we are."

"Wait till you hear what the kid's got to say, Colorado," put in one of those that had entered with Smithy.

"Spit it out!" advised the proprietor.

"I want to know what Mr. Joe Hurley thinks of

this?" Smithy managed to make plain. "What do you think they are saying about Nell Blossom?"

"Nell Blossom?"

Hurley's voice did not join the general chorus which repeated the cabaret singer's name. But he looked up, his gaze met that of the parson, and a lightning glance of understanding passed between them.

"What's eatin' on you, Smithy?" demanded Colorado Brown.

"Up in Tolley's. I was just in there. I heard Tolley and Tom Hicks and some others of his gang talkin'. I couldn't help hearin' what was said, and when I went for 'em this—this is what I got."

He almost choked on the words. Joe Hurley rose up as though a slow spring uncoiled beneath him.

"What did they say, Smithy?" he asked, and the tone of his voice seemed to quell all other sounds.

"Why, the skunks!" cried Smithy, "they said Nell Blossom shot Dick the Devil last spring and flung him over the wall of the canyon into Runaway River."

CHAPTER XXI

THE DRAMA OF A LIE

THE tense silence that followed Smithy's half-sobbing speech marked the poignancy of the moment and the utter stupefaction of his hearers. To all but Joe Hurley and Hunt such an accusation as this aimed at Nell Blossom was entirely unlooked for. If the crowd understood anything at all, they understood that Boss Tolley, if he had started the scandal, courted annihilation!

Indeed the first question fired at Smithy following his statement was:

"Why didn't you fill 'em with lead, Smithy?"

"I didn't have no gun," replied the grocery clerk. "And Tom Hicks downed me before I could get at Tolley."

"Did he say it, Smithy?" demanded Colorado Brown.

"'Twas him says he knows all about it. Says that Nell killed Dick Beckworth."

They talked. But it was Joe Hurley who acted. He threw down the hand of cards he held.

"Mike," he said to the Mexican, Miguel Santos, "you know I ain't in the habit of betraying cold

feet. But I got some business to tend to. Colorado," he added to the proprietor, "I'll settle when I come in again. I'm in a hurry."

With the quickness of a cat he slipped through the crowd about the table and Smithy and shot for the door. But the parson was at his elbow before he could get through the portal.

"You'd better keep out of this, Willie," Hurley said between his teeth. "There's goin' to be the devil to pay in a minute."

"It is as much my business as it is yours, Joe," said Hunt, in step with his long stride on the sidewalk where they headed toward the Grub Stake. "And we must do something before those fellows back there wake up."

"What?" was Joe's startled ejaculation.

"That stupid Smithy has started something. Some of those fellows will be out after us in a minute, and if they get to the Grub Stake before we straighten things out, there will be trouble."

"Trouble? Youbetcha there'll be trouble! And you'd better keep out of it, Willie."

"I mean to stop it," said Hunt softly.

But Joe Hurley did not hear him. He turned abruptly and burst into the main entrance of the Grub Stake. It did not take Joe Hurley's trained glance to see that something had happened here. Hunt sensed, too, that if there had already been trouble, more of the same kind was expected.

The girl who usually presided at the door—the girl who parked your gun if you wanted to play, or your spurs if you wanted to dance and gave you checks in return for them—had got out of the way. Several of the gaming tables were empty. There was not a man standing in front of the bar, and Boss Tolley's assistants behind the "rosewood" had "stepped out."

Hunt knew at first glance that some of the toughest men in the camp were gathered here—either about the remaining tables or with Boss Tolley at the far end of the bar by the door of his tiny office where the safes stood. That office, Joe had told the parson, was an arsenal. There was a bodyguard around the dive keeper of at least six men.

Joe Hurley saw that all this group was armed. A flash of the several men at the gaming tables assured the mining man that they might be neutral, save perhaps the dealers for the house. But he realized that Tolley's gang was primed for mischief. It was a wonder that Smithy, the poor fool, had got out of the place alive!

Hunt had pushed ahead of Joe the moment they stepped inside the door. They were both big men, and Joe's advantage of height could not hide the parson's bulk. In a flash, before a word was spoken, Joe took two long strides sideways and got behind the first table, which was empty. And he, by this act, left Hunt out of the line of any bullet

aimed by the gang standing at the end of the bar at himself.

A gun had not yet been drawn, however, on either side. Nor had a word been spoken by either Tolley and his gang or by the two men who had entered so suddenly. Still, not a man in the barroom missed the significance of Joe Hurley's strategic move.

Sam Tubbs, withered old scarecrow that he was, had been facing the door at a near-by table. It was evident that Steve Siebert, the returned desert rat, had been treating Tubbs to more liquor than was good for him. But Sam had some wit left.

Joe's action forecast the popping of guns—instantly! Sam had seen too many such brawls to play the part of "innocent bystander" if he could help it. He let his feet slide out from under him, shot down in the chair on the small of his back, and passed out of sight under the table with all the celerity of an imp in a pantomime.

Steve Siebert, however, did not even remove his pipe from his lips, but wheeled in his chair and glared from Joe to Tolley and his bodyguard. The old man swung a heavy, old-style six-gun low on his hip. But he did not touch it—then.

Joe's attitude was as wary as that of a puma about to spring. He crouched. By one quick motion he could overturn the table, drop behind it, and use it as a bulwark. But he must move quickly enough to escape, perhaps, seven bullets from as many guns.

It was Joe Hurley who first spoke.

"Tolley!" he said fiercely but clearly, "I warned you what I'd do if you repeated that lie about the girl. You remember, well enough, you hound! Stand out from those bootlickers of yours and take your medicine."

The challenge got no response from Tolley but a grimace like that of a wolf in a trap. He did not make a motion to draw his own gun. He was too wise to do that in any event, for he knew he could not beat Joe to it! And then—what did he subsidize these gunmen for if not for such an emergency as this?

"Open your trap, you hound!" commanded Joe. "If you won't fight, speak!"

"Wait a moment."

The parson had actually not halted at all when he entered with Joe Hurley. He had merely slowed up. He was approaching Tolley and his men down the long length of the bar. But when he spoke Tom Hicks half drew his gun.

"Mr. Tolley," Hunt said in the same clear but quiet voice, "will undoubtedly explain and apologize for what we understand he has said about the young woman in question. Come now, Mr. Tolley! you are ready to take back your words, aren't you? You have no more proof, have you, of your—er—misstatement than you had several weeks ago when you

discussed the affair with Mr. Hurley in my hearing?"

"What are you butting in for?" returned Tolley with a threatening growl.

"For the sake of peace, Mr. Tolley," explained the parson determinedly.

"Get back, Willie!" Joe ordered from the background.

He dared not draw his gun, for if he did Hunt would be right in the line of fire again. With a single motion Tom Hicks could get into action.

"You derved buttinsky!" spat out Tolley vengefully. "Mind what you are doing, or you'll stop lead."

"That will not make a lie the truth, Mr. Tolley," rejoined Hunt, now squarely between the group of desperadoes and Joe Hurley's position.

"You mean to say I'm a liar?" blustered Tolley.

"I mean to say that the story you have repeated about the young woman and the man you say has disappeared has no foundation in fact and that you have in your possession no proof to back your statement. If that is calling you a liar, Mr. Tolley, then consider yourself so called!"

There was a little stir among the listeners at the tables—a stir of approval, and one voice ejaculated:

"What's it all about?"

Evidently not all of these men now present had been at hand when Smithy had taken offense at Tol-

ley's words earlier in the evening which precipitated this situation. Hunt, without raising his voice at all, continued:

"I take it that you have no new evidence of a crime having been committed? You did not see the man fall? You merely saw the young woman at the summit of the declivity? Later you recovered a saddle you recognized from the fallen rubbish? Am I right? Isn't that the extent of your evidence?"

"Well! Look yere! I reckon I know what I am talkin' about——"

"But you do not talk about what you know," interposed Hunt. "To my personal knowledge—and that of Mr. Hurley—the missing man was not buried under that heap of rubbish with his horse."

"Then he went into the river!" cried Tolley.

Here Joe Hurley put in a very pungent word:

"And that might easily be true. If you found his horse and removed the saddle, you might have found the man, too, Tolley, and removed some of his harness."

"What's that?" was the startled demand.

"From the first," Joe said sternly, "I suspected you, Tolley. Your dust won't hide what you have done. You are altogether too sure the man is dead—after first reporting that you had heard from him in Denver.

"In fact, you are too anxious to cast suspicion on another person. Your conscience—if you have

such a thing—is troubling you, Tolley. At least, your fears have made you try to invent a lie that doesn't work out just the way you expected it to."

"I'll show you——"

"You'll show me nothing, Tolley!" retorted Hurley. "You'll listen—and these other gentlemen. You got the man's saddle. It is just as probable that you found his body, as well as that of the horse. And he was known to wear a money-belt around his waist. He was likewise known to be well-fixed when he left Canyon Pass. He'd been doing well here. You knew it, if anybody did. You confess that you rode after the man. And you confess that you got his saddle. Confess the rest of it, you dog. What else have you got in your safe that belonged to——"

Boss Tolley threw caution to the winds at this juncture. Hurley's scathing denunciation pricked to life in him such personal courage as he possessed. He flung himself forward with a howl of rage and whipped the gun from the holster at his hip.

"Get down, Willie!" shouted Hurley and flung the table on its edge with a crash, dropping behind it.

CHAPTER XXII

A FACE IN THE STORM

AN interruption—a voice as hoarse as the croak of a vulture—rose above the din of other voices:

“Tolley! You other fellers! Put ’em up! H’ist ’em!”

Tolley halted—it seemed in midflight. Even the gun hand of Tom Hicks relaxed. From the other side of the room old Steve Siebert commanded the situation—and the group of desperate men. The black muzzle of his gun gaped like the mouth of a cannon. Hunt did not stand between him and Tolley’s crowd. The old man steadied the barrel of his weapon on the edge of the table behind which he sat and covered the bunch perfectly.

“H’ist ’em!” he said again, and as Tolley’s gun clattered to the floor and Hicks thrust back his weapon into his sheath, he added: “I don’t aim to mix in what ain’t my business, as a usual thing. But when I see seven skunks goin’ after two boys—an’ one o’ them a parson and not ironed a-tall—I reckon on takin’ a hand. Put ’em up!”

The ruffians obeyed. Seven pairs of hands reached for the smoke-begrimed ceiling. Several

startled faces appeared under the archway between the barroom and the dance hall. One was the desert-bitten countenance of Andy McCann. He would not have sat to drink in the same room with his one-time partner; but Steve Siebert's voice had stung McCann to action. Steve saw him.

"Andy, you derved old rat!" Steve cried, "shut that office door and lock it. Then, just frisk them rustlers and remove their irons. There ain't goin' to be no shootin.' Whatever the row is, it's goin' to be settled plumb peaceful."

McCann snarled at the other old pocket-hunter like a tiger cat; but he obeyed—and not without some enjoyment of the chagrin of Tolley and his gangsters.

"It takes us old sourdoughs to be slick," he chuckled, when he had dumped an armful of guns on an empty table. "You boys ain't dry behind the ears yet when it comes to shootin' scrapes."

"There ain't goin' to be no shootin'," repeated Steve Siebert. "Not 'nless them fellers start it with their mouths," and he grinned such a toothless grin that he almost lost his grip on the pipestem clamped in one corner of his mouth.

"Now, what's it all about? What's the row? What gal you talkin' about? Who's the feller that was killed? I'm sort o' curious."

Joe Hurley stood erect again. He laughed.

"Great saltpeter!" he exclaimed, "you certainly are a friend in need, old-timer."

"Come on," rejoined Steve. "Let's have the per-tic'lars."

It was the Reverend Willett Ford Hunt who took upon himself the explanation.

"Nell Blossom!" cried Steve. "That leetle song-bird? You mean to say all this row is over her?"

"Mr. Tolley has made the statement that Miss Blossom was the cause of this Beckworth's death. His horse went over the cliff into the canyon. Whether or not the man went with it——"

"He did!" cried Andy McCann, smiting his thigh resoundingly with his palm. "By gravy! Is that what's eatin' all you fellers?"

"Say! Who's runnin' this court, I'd like to know?" demanded Steve Siebert angrily.

"Aw, shut up—you old lizard," said McCann, flaming at him. "'Tain't no court. It ain't nothin' like it. Put up your gun. It's all off. Dick the Devil ain't dead at all. At least he wasn't killed that time he went over the cliff. He's Dick the Devil sure 'nough, and he's got more luck than a hanged man."

"Just what do you mean?" Hunt asked.

"Why, we seen him—me and that old rat sittin' there with his gun, makin' goo-goo eyes. Sure! And me and him pulled Dick out of the river. He went clean over his horse's head and landed in the river—

same's a bird. He might have been drowned if me and that ground owl there hadn't got him out. But he never said one word about Nell Blossom bein' with him or havin' anything to do with his comin' down that cliff. No, sir!"

"Nary a word," agreed the surprised Siebert. "Nary a word."

"What—what became of him?" stammered Hunt, a great weight lifted from his heart.

"He went along with me to the edge of the desert," said Siebert slowly. "He dried out at my fire that night. Next morning he lit out to hit the Lamber-ton trail. That's all I know about Dick."

"And it's more than I knowed," grunted Andy McCann. "That old rat there might have garroted Dick for his money. But it sure wasn't Nell Blossom that croaked Dick the Devil—if he's dead at all."

Here Hunt stepped between the two old prospectors. It looked as though somebody had to separate them or there might have been a shooting, after all!

But it was Joe Hurley who had the last word. He set up the overturned table and walked over to the bar.

"To show that there's no hard feelings," he drawled, "this'll be on me. Get busy, Tolley, on the right side of this bar. And hereafter, you think twice before you say anything you're not dead sure of about Nell Blossom. Somebody'd better drag

Sam Tubbs out from under that table. He don't want to miss this."

There sounded a sudden rush of heavily shod feet outside the barroom door. As Hunt had expected, an angry crowd from Colorado Brown's burst in.

"Just in season, boys," Hurley continued. "All a mistake about our Nell. Tolley just proved himself to be as careless with the truth as he always is. Isn't that so, Tolley?"

Tolley grunted.

The winter weather forecast by the return of Steve Siebert and Andy McCann from the desert held off the next morning when Betty Hunt and Nell started on their usual ride into the hills.

Nell had heard a garbled report but few of the particulars of the incident which the night before had threatened bloodshed at the Grub Stake. She knew that the parson had again done something that was sure to endear him to the Passonians in general. And his courageous act had been in her cause. But she had failed to learn of the disapproval of Dick Beckworth's reported death.

She said nothing to Betty about the incident. She had begun to shrink from discussing the rougher side of the life of Canyon Pass with the parson's sister. As Joe Hurley would have expressed it, Nell Blossom was becoming "right gentled" through her association with Betty Hunt.

Betty herself, in Nell's company, managed to put aside those more serious thoughts and anxieties of mind that ruffled her natural composure at other times. Since the day, weeks before, when she had been forced to wreck Joe Hurley's hope of happiness, the cloud of despondency that overshadowed her life seemed at times greater than she could live under.

Nor could the Eastern girl put aside such thoughts of the Westerner as at first amazed and startled, then revealed to the honest soul of Betty Hunt that the unfortunate circumstance in her past life that made it impossible for her to make Joe happy, likewise barred her own heart from happiness.

Wicked as her strict up-bringing made the fact seem, she had to admit that she had fallen under the spell of Joe Hurley's generous character, that she loved him. She could not deny this discovery, although it filled her mind with confusion. Wedded to a man she hated and in love with a man she could not wed!

In any event, this was a secret—like the other that so disturbed her—which under no circumstances could she confide to either her brother or any friend. At first she felt the discovery a degrading one. Brought up as she had been under the grim puritanism of her Aunt Prudence Mason, the idea of a married woman admitting that she loved a man other than the one she was married to was a sin.

The idea of divorce was as foreign to her religious training as was the thought of fratricide.

She was cheerful on the surface at least when she and Nell rode out of Canyon Pass and through the East Fork. They climbed the canyon wall on that side by a tortuous path on which only a burro or a very sure-footed pony was safe. It was Nell, when they were once on the summit, who discovered the threat of a weather change.

The air was very keen. Many of the bushes by the way had shriveled during the night as though before a furnace blast.

"Black frost," said the younger girl. "Old Steve and Andy know their little book. Sam says Steve told him there was a blizzard coming. We won't ride far to-day, Betty."

"A blizzard? Only fancy," murmured the Eastern girl.

She was not much impressed. She had no experience—even of New England winter storms—to enable her to judge the nature of a storm in these Western mountains.

But Nell should have known better than to lead the way into a gulch which quite shut them in from sight of the surrounding country. A blizzard is a chancy thing; and often the first storm of a Western winter is the worst of all.

They rode to a spring at which deer drank; they saw many tracks, but there were none of the pretty

creatures in sight. Birds fluttered through the chaparral with strange cries, and the rabbits ran back and forth as though much disturbed by domestic happenings.

"I never saw them jacks so queer acting," said Nell thoughtfully. "We'd better ride home, Betty."

"Why?" asked the other girl gayly. "You are not afraid they will attack us, are you?"

"Not that," and the Western-born young woman smiled. "But there's something comin', I reckon—just as Steve and Andy say."

Before they rode up out of the gulch they heard something slashing like a multitude of knives through the dead leaves overhead. When they rode out into the open they beheld the thick cloud that had almost reached the zenith, and out of that cloud came not snow, but ice!

Fine particles of the sharpest crystal were driven in a thick haze through the singing air. Nell instantly whipped off her neckcloth and tied it across her nose and mouth, warning Betty to follow her example.

"Get this in your lungs, Betty, and you'll have pneumonia as sure as sure!" she shouted.

Frightened, they urged their ponies on to the beginning of the rough path down the canyon wall. Although they were soon somewhat sheltered from the driving ice-storm there were bare places where the two girls suffered the full force of the gale.

"I know a place!" cried Nell in a muffled voice. "We got to hole up till this stops. Come on!"

It had grown dark of a sudden. Nell pulled her pony off the path, and he picked his way daintily to a cavity in the wall. Here an overhanging rock offered some shelter. At least, the girls were out of the steady beat of the storm.

They dismounted and got behind the ponies, between their warm bodies and the rock itself. If Betty was the more frightened of the two, she showed it no more than did Nell Blossom.

The air became thicker and the whine of the wind rose to a shriek which all but drowned their voices when they tried to communicate with each other. It was such a manifestation of the storm king as Betty Hunt had never seen before.

They were but a little way off the path. Suddenly both girls, in spite of the wind, heard the clatter of shod hoofs. Another horse was coming down the path. In a moment they dimly saw the looming figure of a man leading the animal.

"Who is it?" gasped Betty, but if Nell heard the question she did not answer.

Nell clutched Betty's wrist for silence. The girls stared at the man beating his way downward. He wore a broad-brimmed hat, but they could see the long, black, curling hair flowing from beneath it. He turned his face toward them, and Betty beheld the keen face and heavy mustache of the stranger

she had seen hiding from the sheriff and his posse weeks before near the trail to Hoskins!

The man progressed so slowly, and he was so near, that the Eastern girl could study his features now with more certainty. There was something in the contour of his face that reminded her of Andy Wilkenson!

Could it be he? Was it possible that this fugitive—the man the officers had accused of a crime—was the debonair Andy who had so enthralled her girlish mind and heart back there at Grandhampton Hall?

She had not forgotten Wilkenson's observations about Crescent City. Betty had never ceased to fear that he might appear to her in this part of the great West. But here—now—and in this dramatic manner?

Much shaken, she turned to look at Nell Blossom. She suddenly realized that the other girl was sagging against her shoulder very strangely. She glanced down into Nell's muffled face.

The younger girl's eyes were closed. She was as pallid as death itself. Nell Blossom had fainted!

CHAPTER XXIII

A GREAT LIGHT DAWNS

SOME men can escape their duty if they choose to—can ignore it, flout it, even deny its very existence—but not one who is called to be a leader of men toward a higher plane of daily existence. The greatest sophism with which the race has ever been cursed is that hoary one of the lazy preacher: "Do as I say, not as I do."

Religious precept is utterly worthless if the preceptor does not follow his own expounded faith with a living example. The Reverend Willett Ford Hunt had come to that pass where he could no longer ignore the fact that his friend, Joe Hurley, was on the down grade. When the parson cooled down after the exciting events of that evening, both in Colorado Brown's place and at the Grub Stake, he saw more clearly that he had fallen into error.

If he was to be the spiritual guide and mentor of his congregation at Canyon Pass, he must be the same to one member of it as he was to another. He had not been slow to admonish others of his parishioners; but the man who had brought him here—the one whom he really looked upon as being

his chief supporter in the work he was striving to do—was slipping away from him and into flagrantly evil ways.

If Hunt's character has been revealed at all in this narrative, moral and physical courage have not seemed to be its lack. Then why had the young parson failed to go after Joe Hurley as he did after Judson, the storekeeper, Sam Tubbs, Hi Brownell, Smithy, and other men who were wont to 'kick over the traces?'

There was just one clear and cogent reason why Hunt had not taken Joe to task for his failings, as he already had many another man in Canyon Pass. His old friendship for Joe had nothing to do with this neglect. And certainly he did not fear making the good cause in which he was so interested a powerful enemy. There was nothing in Joe Hurley's generous character that would suggest that for a moment.

It was, in short, the fact that Hunt believed that he and Joe were in love with the same girl.

Although, as far as Hunt had observed, Nell Blossom displayed no particular fondness for Joe Hurley, the latter believed the mining man "understood" the cabaret singer. At least, Nell revealed no such disdain for Joe Hurley as she had publicly for Hunt.

When the latter reviewed the late incidents as they related to Joe, while he tossed on his mattress that

night, he admitted he was taking the wrong course with his friend. He had seemed tacitly to overlook sins of commission on Joe's part that he would have pilloried in another.

Had Hurley not been heated by drink and his passion for gambling, he would not have pursued that unwise course in going to the Grub Stake in a mood which had all but precipitated tragedy. Joe's recklessness had been unleashed, and Hunt had been obliged to stand by after the unexpected conclusion of the scene and see his friend drink with the very men who, a few minutes before, had been ready to take Joe's life.

He arose with a new determination. He saw his sister and Nell Blossom ride away from the Wild Rose Hotel. Then he made his way directly to the Great Hope Mine.

Hurley had an office—a small shack—off at one side. The parson found him alone in it, his boots cocked on his battered desk, his pipe drawing well. His grin was as infectious as ever.

"Well, Willie! some time that last night, eh?" was Joe's greeting. "When I get in a tight corner again, I'll never wish for a better side-partner than you, old sobersides!"

"Joe," returned Hunt with a directness that seemed brutal, "if you had been your sober self last night—quite the same man you are wont to be—there would have been no tight corner."

"Huh?" The other's boots came to the floor with emphasis. His brown eyes sparked. The muscles of his jaws set grimly. "You've got a crust, Willie, to talk to me like that."

"You need talking to, Joe; and I'm going to do the talking. No! Sit right where you are and listen. You've got it coming to you; and, if you are the man I have always thought you, you'll stand the gaff."

"Aw, shucks! A drink or two isn't going to kill Joe Hurley."

"A drink or two kills his moral sense, and kills his usefulness as a good citizen," returned Hunt. "Then, you have been gambling steadily."

"Great saltpeter! isn't a feller to have any fun at all? I haven't lost much to Miguel."

"It is your example to the rest. And what you have lost would help the fund for our church building. And we must have a church, Joe."

Joe uttered something under his breath.

"What makes you so reckless, Joe?"

"Shucks, Willie! Maybe I have slipped a few cogs. A lone bachelor like me can't help it sometimes, can he?" asked Hurley, with a smile that tried to be whimsical rather than bitter. "Remember, Willie, I haven't got a sister to keep me well balanced. It's womenfolks and—and an interest in one that makes a man a sobersides."

"Is it!" returned Hunt, with scorn. "If a man

hasn't the stamina to stay straight, no girl will ever keep him in the narrow path—believe me!"

"You belittle Miss Betty's powers of persuasion," returned Joe, with a sly glance.

"If that is your belief," Hunt said, with sharpness and a rising color, "I should think you would keep straight for Nell's sake."

"Nell Blossom?"

"Yes. You are interested in her, aren't you?"

"Surest thing you know, Willie."

"Then, for her sake——"

"Hold on!" ejaculated Hurley, sudden suspicion in his gaze. "Do you think I'm soft on Nell?"

"Well—er—aren't you?" demanded his friend rather faintly.

"I'm free to confess I was," said Joe slowly, watching Hunt now with growing understanding in his eyes. "But that little skeesicks showed me where I got off long ago. And I tell you fair, Willie, she is not the girl who is bothering me."

"Then, there is a girl? Joe! You and Betty——"

Hurley put up his hand, turning his face away. "No use, Willie. Betty's given me my congé, too. I reckon I am an 'also-ran' with the ladies."

"My dear Joe!" Hunt grabbed his hand. "I'm sorry. I don't understand Betty."

Hurley went to the door suddenly, opened it, and looked out. A cold blast from the hills ruffled the papers on the desk. The sun was suddenly dimmed.

In the distance the coming wind whined like a sick dog.

"Say! we're going to get it," he muttered.

"A storm coming?" asked Hunt absently. His own heart sang. A foolish happiness swept over him. He went to look out over Hurley's shoulder. "Does it look bad to you?"

"Youbetcha! It's coming faster than you ever saw a storm move, I reckon, Willie. Those old has-beens, Steve and Andy, can't be fooled. They got in from the desert just ahead of it."

"A blizzard, Joe?" cried the parson with sudden anxiety. "The girls!"

"What about them? What girls?"

"Betty and Nell. They've gone out on horseback."

"You don't mean it? Er—Well, Nell must have seen it coming and turned back. She knows this country as well as a man. But, come on! Let's go down to Tim's corral and see if the ponies are in again. It wouldn't do——"

He slammed the office door, shouted to his manager, and strode away. Hunt had to put his best foot forward to keep up with him. Women and children were already scuttling to shelter when they went down through the town. Bill Judson waved a hand at them from his door, shouting:

"Them old desert rats knowed their biz, didn't they? I'd set my clock by them, I would."

At the corral the two young men saw at a glance that the girls' ponies had not been returned by Cholo Sam. They went on toward the hotel in silence. Now the first needles of the ice-storm cut their faces. It was nothing like any storm Hunt had ever seen. And how fast it grew in volume and strength!

Cholo Sam and Maria were at the door of the hotel, looking down the street eagerly and anxiously.

"Which way did they go?" shouted Hurley, without any preamble.

"Oh, Señor Hurley!" cried Sam. "To the East. T'roo the East Fork."

Already sight of the rugged path up the heights on that side of the canyon was blotted out by the driving ice particles.

"Shall we get horses and go after them?" panted Hunt.

"Horses won't live in this. Maybe we can stir up some of the boys to go with us. Wish I had my roughnecks here."

But there was not time to go back to the mine. The storm had come on so suddenly that the workers above the town might hole in until the first force of the blizzard was over.

Hunt ran up to his room to get his heavier coat and a couple of blankets. As he descended the stairs, Cholo Sam came from the barroom with a filled flask in his hand.

"Some of the best brandy, Señor Hunt," he said.

"It is for the seekness only that comes with the cold. Ah thees ice in the lungs is death, señor—death!"

The parson took it without hesitation and slipped it into his pocket. He ran out to see Joe Hurley coming out of Colorado Brown's place with Jib Collins and Cale Mack behind him. In another few seconds, so rapidly did the driving ice thicken the air, Hunt lost sight of the trio and they fairly bumped into him when they reached the spot where he stood.

"That you, Willie?" shouted Hurley. "We'll get a rope and tie ourselves together. Tie mufflers over our faces. Say, there may be some more fellers in the Grub Stake who will help."

He turned that way, finding his direction more by sense than by sight. They stumbled up the steps and in at the door of the Grub Stake.

At that very moment a half-frozen man, leading a storm-battered horse, had fallen at Tolley's rear door. The dive keeper was dragging him into the place like a log as Hurley, Hunt, and their companions strode into the barroom.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE BARRIER DOWN—FOR A MOMENT

"HEY, you fellers!" shouted Tolley to the several men in the barroom of the Grub Stake. "Come give me a hand. Here's a feller that's taken pretty near his last pill, I reckon."

The parson, as well as Hurley and the others, responded to the dive keeper's call. Tolley kicked shut the back door with savage insistence against the driving wind.

"I reckon his hoss is done for," he panted. "But the feller himself—Hi, Nobbs! get him a jolt of something hot."

Hunt and Joe Hurley helped raise the senseless man, and, with Tolley carrying the feet, they moved him close to one of the glowing stoves. His hat fell off. It was Joe who voiced a surprise that was not his alone.

"Why, Tolley! here's your dead man now. As I'm a sinner—and the parson assures me that I am—this is Dick Beckworth."

"Dick the Devil!" ejaculated two or three in chorus.

"This is a nice sort of a day for him to come

back," muttered Tolley, evidently quite as much amazed as the others.

Hunt peered into the face of the senseless man. There was a certain regularity of feature, in spite of the sharpness and blueness caused by the extreme cold he had suffered, which the parson saw might lead the casual observer to consider Dick Beckworth handsome. His complexion was as spotless as a girl's; the skin scarcely tanned; ears and nose small and perfectly formed; the closed eyes, long-lashed; and the brows as delicately marked as though done with a stencil.

He was shaved, although he had come out of the wilderness, and his jet-black mustache was as silky as his long hair. Dick Beckworth, gambler and lady's man, without doubt made a striking appearance wherever he went. Even lying there on the bench, colorless, and with his eyes closed, the parson realized that the man would be indeed a "heart-breaker"—among young and inexperienced women at least.

It could not be doubted that he had made a strong impression upon the almost childish mind and heart of Nell Blossom. She must have been attracted by this man just as she would have been by a gaudy flower or a bird of brilliant plumage.

Hunt felt a strange loathing for the gambler, much as his present state should excite pity. This was the man, he believed, who had brought about

the change that Joe Hurley said had suddenly come over Nell Blossom's character.

Beckworth had hidden the fact that he had escaped death through his fall into the canyon and so had laid a burden of terror and anguish upon Nell's heart, which was reason enough for her apparent hatred of all mankind.

Nobbs, the barkeeper, brought the drink at Tolley's command. They forced open Dick's jaws and poured the potent stuff into him. The color almost instantly stained his cheeks. His eyelids fluttered. He choked.

"What was it Andy McCann said about him?" Hurley said thoughtfully. "He's got the luck of a hanged man. He's coming around all right. But there are others out in the storm that need help more than this fellow."

"Who's that?" asked one of the men who had been loitering at the Grub Stake bar.

Hurley explained briefly about the absent girls. Two men besides those already of their party volunteered to join Hurley and the parson. A rope—a hair lariat—was likewise found with which the searchers could bind themselves together. It would be the simplest thing imaginable to drift away from each other in such a blinding storm.

Dick Beckworth gave unmistakable signs of returning consciousness. He groaned, struggled, raised up on an elbow to stare about.

"Hold on!" the parson said to Joe. "See if the man can speak. He may know something."

"Right you are, Willie," Hurley agreed. He leaned over the dazed gambler. "Hi, Dick! Do you know me? Joe Hurley! See?"

"Where—where am I?" whispered Dick.

"You're in the Grub Stake, all right, Dick," broke in Tolley eagerly. "The old Grub Stake, I tell ye—that you never ought t've left."

"Grub Stake? Tolley?" questioned Dick. Then he opened his eyes wide and recognized Hurley's face so close to his own. "That you, Joe? I——"

"Which way did you come into town, Dick?" broke in the mining man.

"Eh? What?"

"Did you come through the East Fork or the West Fork?"

"Why—why, the East Fork."

"You did! Did you see anybody on the way down? You came down the cliff, didn't you? Anybody up on the plain?" were Hurley's excited questions.

"Why—I—I——"

"Two women are out in the storm," went on Hurley. "Did you see them anywhere up yonder?"

"Two women? I—I thought they were men. They rode down ahead of me. Then it grew so—so thick I couldn't see 'em again."

"Great saltpeter!" exclaimed Hurley. "You must

have passed 'em. They are up there somewhere among the rocks."

"Or they've gone over the rocks—hosses and all!" groaned Collins.

"Shut up!" muttered his chum, Cale Mack. "Ain't you got no sense? Look at the parson!"

"This is Parson Hunt," explained Hurley to the staring Dick. "His sister Betty is one of the missing girls you saw."

"*Who?*" gasped Dick. "Betty Hunt? Here? Here? At Canyon Pass?"

"My sister," Hunt said hoarsely. "Didn't you see her and Nell Blossom again as you rode down?"

"Your sister?" repeated the startled gambler. "Betty Hunt—your sister?"

He fell back and closed his eyes. Hurley started for the front door.

"No time to lose,—boys," he cried. "Come on! Betty and Nell are somewhere up there along that path. No more delay."

He had already knotted one end of the rope around his waist. Hunt followed his example, leaving six feet or more of slack between them. The other men who were going with them quickly fastened themselves in rotation. They knotted neckerchiefs or mufflers across their faces. Nobbs opened the door for them, and the file went out into the storm.

The roar of the storm as the men came out upon the open bank of the East Fork made the human

voice quite inaudible. Nor could they communicate by signs, for only the dim outlines of the man before him could be seen by the man behind. A tug of the rope was the only signal understood between the searchers.

The driven hail churned the surface of the river to a livid foam. The reflection of this sheet of ruffled water lent them more light than the sun itself. The storm beat upon the string of men with a savageness that appalled Hunt, who had never experienced nature in so bitter a mood.

But what these men of Canyon Pass could do, the parson would not shrink from. And were not the two beings he loved most in this world—Nell Blossom and his sister Betty—in desperate peril somewhere on the other side of the wind-lashed stream?

The water was all of knee-depth over the bar, but Joe waded in without hesitation. They were none of them shod properly for the wading of the stream; but their personal discomfort—or, indeed, their personal peril in any way—did not enter into their consideration in this emergency. Two girls were somewhere up there among the rocks, harassed by the storm and in danger of their lives. The men's job was to get them.

The ice—it was more than mere sleet that whipped them so unmercifully—cut such parts of their faces as were bare, needle sharp and stinging. From under the peak of his cap each man could now see

scarcely a yard before him. They stumbled on as though they were in an unlighted cavern. Once Joe stepped off the track and plunged waist deep in a hole. Hunt hauled him back by the rope, and after a moment they went on again.

They reached the farther bank and stumbled up the sleet-covered strand, standing in a group together for a minute to get their breath and to ease the binding-rope about their bodies.

"I reckon I can smell out the path, boys," said their leader, so they started off again.

As they pressed upward, now and then they shouted—sometimes in unison. But their voices could not penetrate the gale far. The sounds were blown back into their faces as though rebounding from a blank wall.

At a point some distance up the path Hurley halted again and allowed the others to approach. He bawled at them:

"There's a place yonder somewhere under the cliff—I remember it—a half-shelter. They might have reached it."

"Don't get off the path, Joe!" warned Jib Collins.

"But if the girls got off the path?"

"We don't want to lose our way," objected Mack.

"I'm going to take a look!" ejaculated Hurley obstinately. But he could not untie the knot which held him. He fumbled at it. "Got a knife, Willie?"

The parson had already drawn out his pocket-knife. But he slashed the rope between Collins and himself.

"I'm going with you, Joe," he declared.

"Keep shoutin'!" bawled Collins, as the two younger men started off at a tangent from the path.

The bowlders were glassed with ice. The two friends floundered and slipped about in an awkward way, straining themselves enormously and not seldom falling. The one aided the other. It was fortunate, Hunt realized, that they had come together, for one man alone could never have accomplished the journey to the sheer wall of the cliff.

Of a sudden there seemed to be a lull in the gale. Really, they had reached a more sheltered spot. The storm sang around them, but they were not so terribly buffeted.

Joe shouted again:

"Nell! Nell Blossom! Betty!

Hunt joined his voice to that of his friend. They continued to bellow the girls' names. Hurley grabbed the parson's arm suddenly.

"Hush!"

There was a response. A wailing voice replied.

"It's Betty! Your sister!" shouted Joe, and plunged forward, half-dragging the equally excited Hunt with him.

Something loomed up before the latter. He ran into the barrel of a standing horse!

"Here they are!" yelled Hurley.

Somehow, the two young men got around the horses. There was a sheltered place between the beasts and the wall of rock. Hunt heard his sister crying and laughing somewhere near. But it was not she whom he first found.

"Oh, Mr. Hunt! Oh, Mr. Hunt!" sobbed Nell Blossom's voice. "Are you real? You ain't another ghost, are you? Oh! Oh!"

Hunt's arms were around the girl, and he held her fast. Near by, he knew, Joe and Betty were talking—perhaps were whispering. His own lips were close to Nell's ear.

"My dear! My dear!" the parson said over and over again. "God is good to me! I've found you safe."

Nell snuggled into his arms like a frightened child and clung to him.

CHAPTER XXV

UNDERSTANDING

It was Betty Hunt, who, after all, seemed to possess the bolder spirit of the two girls. Nell clung to the parson like a frightened child. He realized, however, after the first flush of his emotion that he had allowed his own overpowering desire for the singer to confuse his mind. The barrier between them was down for a moment only; he raised it again himself, for he knew he was taking advantage unfairly of the terrified girl.

It was Hunt, however, who lifted Nell Blossom into her pony's saddle with one of the blankets wrapped well about her, and when Joe Hurley started away leading Betty's mount, the parson followed close behind. The two young men had freed themselves of each other; but the horses and their riders bulked so big against the driving curtain of the storm that they could scarcely lose each other.

They heard the other searchers shouting and Joe pulled his gun from its holster and fired two shots into the air. The signal was replied to immediately. In a minute or two Joe ran, head-on, into Jib Collins.

"Hey! did you find 'em both?" bawled the man.

"Youbetcha!" responded Hurley. "When the parson and I go out, we bring home the bacon, every time."

They took up the march to the ford. At the water's edge one of the other men came to the off side of each pony, and they forced the snorting animals into the stream. The foaming barrier did not look encouraging to the storm-beaten beasts.

They all got through safely and up into the town. The driving storm was changing to snow and sleet; but the foundation of ice that had first fallen made walking difficult. The girls were lifted off their horses and carried up into Betty's room, where Maria gave them every assistance in her power. Somebody put away the horses. Joe scurried off to his own bachelor shack, while Hunt stripped in his room and gave himself a savage rub-down with coarse towels. It had been a terrible experience; but his spirits and his blood were both in glow!

Surely Nell Blossom could not be unfriendly hereafter. It must be confessed that the parson's thought was more entangled with Nell and his recent association with her than in anything else.

Cholo Sam brought up a steaming pot of coffee, his dark face expanded with delight.

Ah, Señor Hunt!" the Mexican said, "you an' de Señor Hurley—you are de pure queel, eh? De boys all cheer you—my goodness, yes!"

When Hunt was dressed again he went to Betty's door and knocked. His sister's response to his summons was brisk and cheerful, as usual. Yet, when he entered and looked keenly at her, he thought there was something feverish—or was it expectant?—in the look she gave him.

The girls were both in the big bed, heaped with blankets. Nell's petite face, ruffled about by one of Betty's boudoir caps, was pale. Indeed, the parson's sister looked in much the better condition of the two. The excitement and danger of the adventure which had befallen them seemed to have affected the girls in a paradoxical manner. Whereas the Eastern girl might be expected to be overcome by the affair and Nell have suffered the adventure as an ordinary experience, the result seemed really to be the other way around! Nell lay in the bed pale, almost hysterical it would seem. Betty could scarcely control her excitement.

"Ford!" she exclaimed, "I need you. Try to convince this foolish girl that there is no such thing as a ghost—a real ghost."

Hunt smiled, but he could not be unsympathetic. He realized that Nell Blossom, being brought up as she had been—even associating so long with Mother Tubbs—was probably hopelessly superstitious. He could not find it in his heart to oppose roughly any fear Nell might hold regarding supernatural things. He tried to put his admonition in a kindly way.

"If there is any truth at all in the matter of ghosts," he said, "it must be of a somewhat unreal nature, must it not? Ghosts are supposed to be too ethereal for sight or touch or sound. And the only smell, even, accompanying their visitations, is supposed to be of brimstone, isn't it?"

"That feller ought to smell of brimstone all right!" muttered Nell suddenly hectic in her language. "He ought to come plumb from the bad place."

"What does she mean?" Hunt asked Betty. Yet he half suspected what was in the singer's mind. "Did you girls see——"

"Nell declares," interrupted Betty, still with that strange excitement, "that she has seen the ghost of a man she calls Dick Beckworth."

"Dick Beckworth," Hunt repeated calmly. "You saw him, I presume," he watched the pale face on the pillow all the time, "on the side of the cliff over yonder? He rode down behind you——"

"Do you mean——" gasped Nell.

A flame of color flashed into both her cheeks. Her blue eyes grew round with surprise.

"He says he came into town by that path," the young man rejoined. "He put us on to the track of you girls. He said he saw you start down the path ahead of him."

"He is alive!" murmured Nell.

"His horse was in bad shape, I believe," Hunt told her. "But the last I knew—just before we left

the Grub Stake to look for you—Dick Beckworth gave every promise of getting on quite well.”

“Dick the Devil!” muttered Nell. “That sure is his name.”

“From what I have heard about him,” said Hunt, “I think his nickname quite fits him. But it was probably Tolley’s meanness alone that made you—that is,” he hastened to correct himself, “that made all of the trouble. That was thrashed out last evening, Miss Nell. Steve Siebert and Andy McCann proved Dick was not dead, although he did go over the cliff back there in the spring.”

“I don’t know what you are both talking about,” Betty interposed. “Who is this—this—Dick Beckworth, do you call him?”

“A gambler, Betty,” said her brother. “You would scarcely know such a person. But unfortunately both Miss Nell and I have been obliged to mix with all classes of society,” he smiled again, “and so we know such people.”

“Nell should not sing in those places.” Betty said it with conviction. But in a moment she turned again to the identity of the man whose reappearance had startled Nell Blossom so greatly that she had fainted in the storm. “What—what does this man, Dick, look like?”

“Not an unhandsome fellow,” said the parson generously. “A somewhat cruel face—ruthless perhaps would be the better term. Good features; a beautiful

complexion—if such a term should be applied to a man's skin,” and he laughed.

“You do not like him, Ford!” exclaimed Betty quickly.

“Would I be likely to?” mildly asked her brother.

“Oh! But I do not want a psychoanalysis of the man,” said Betty, and she used a handkerchief to half hide her own face. “Just what does he look like?”

“Mildly dark. A beautiful, oiled mustache—like a crow's wing as the Victorian lady novelists would say. Heavy black hair. Under different circumstances—you must remember I saw him only after he was dragged out of the storm and on the border of a collapse—I judge Dick Beckworth would be quite the gentleman in all appearance, and quite the devil at heart.”

“You said it!” agreed Nell.

“A mustache—and thick black hair,” murmured Betty. “Yes. I saw him go by when we were cowering there under that wall, too. Well, I am relieved.” Her laugh did not sound right in her brother's ears. “I am glad that it did not turn out to be a real ghost.”

Hunt sat down upon a chair at Nell's side of the bed. The singer looked at him, and there suddenly flashed into her eyes a warm light that enhanced her beauty. She put out a little brown

hand and gripped his, which was only too ready to be seized.

"Parson—Mr. Hunt, you are a good man!" she said, chokingly. "I heard about what you did last night. But I didn't hear all about it; so I didn't know Dick was alive. I—I'm mighty wicked, I reckon. I ain't glad he didn't die——"

"No need to go into that," urged Hunt quickly. "All such things are in the hands of Providence. But your mind, I hope, Nell, is relieved."

Betty looked from the face of the girl on the pillow to her brother's glowing countenance. It was another shock for Betty Hunt, but she understood.

The sudden, sharp blizzard that tore across the country blew itself out by nightfall. In the morning the sun shone brilliantly, a warm wind followed the gale, and the snow and ice melted like a September frost. It had been only a foretaste of winter.

The effect of the incidents of that day remained longer in the hearts of some of the participators in the events than it did upon the earth or the rivers, the rocks and gorges, the frosted herbage, or other physical and material matters about Canyon Pass. To be in mutual peril, to suffer alike the buffetings of the storm, had linked Betty Hunt and Nell Blossom with a chain that could not lightly be severed.

There was, too, a secret knowledge on the East-

ern girl's part that made this chain stronger than Nell imagined. The latter had no suspicion that Dick Beckworth—Dick the Devil—was a link in the chain that bound her to the parson's sister. There was as well another thing that made the cabaret singer an object of Betty's deeper interest. The latter had seen in her brother's face something which had vastly surprised her and something which—had it been revealed to her before this time—would have horrified Betty as well as startled her.

The Reverend Willett Ford Hunt was plainly and frankly more concerned in Nell Blossom than he had any right to be—unless he proposed to declare himself the singer's suitor. It was a somewhat shocking thought for Betty—no two ways about it. She had scarcely ever considered her brother in the light of a marrying man, and never here at Canyon Pass! For it to have been suggested that Hunt would find an object of sentimental interest in this Western mining camp would have completely confounded Betty at an earlier date.

And Nell Blossom? A singer in a rough amusement place that Betty would consider herself smirched if she entered? Yet—and Betty was surprised to consider it—she was much less amazed by her brother's seeming choice than she presumed she would be. Besides, there was a reason why Betty Hunt felt that she might not criticise her brother's course in this affair.

When Nell Blossom had recovered from the exposure sufficiently to go home to Mother Tubbs, and that was not until late in the day following the storm, Betty had gained from her brother all he knew and much that he surmised regarding Nell's association with the gambler who had returned to the Grub Stake at so dramatic a moment.

For his part, Hunt had not the first suspicion that Betty held any personal interest in the man, Dick Beckworth. But he knew that his sister suspected his love for Nell Blossom.

Hunt braced himself for an argument, and a serious one. Betty veered from Nell herself in a most surprising manner and seemed to feel interest only in Dick the Devil.

"He is scarcely a person in whom you would find any interest did you meet him, Betty," declared the parson. "Believe me, as Joe says, the fellow is one of those fungi attached to society that would much better be lopped off than allowed to develop and spread their vile spawn about."

"Oh!" gasped Betty. "You mean it would have been better had you and—and Mr. Hurley found the man's remains where you found his horse? Oh, Ford!"

"Somehow," said the parson gravely, "I feel that way."

"Ford!" cried his sister vehemently. "This is an awful place! Let—let us go back East."

The parson shook his head slowly. "No, Betty. You may go if you wish. I do not blame you for wanting to give it up. There is no reason why you should sacrifice yourself. But for me—Canyon Pass is mine. I will not own to failure. Indeed, my work is not without promise. I am going to reach the heart of Canyon Pass in some way, and I will keep on in the quest as long as I am given strength."

It was Betty's last outbreak against conditions. Nor did her brother suspect for a moment the reason for the sudden renewal of her hatred of the mining town.

CHAPTER XXVI

THREATENING WEATHER

JOE HURLEY had taken a new lease on cheerfulness; yet he scarcely could have explained why his condition of mind had so suddenly improved. But it was not difficult for him to put a digit upon that very moment of time when this new feeling had dawned in his mind.

It was when, with Hunt, he had plowed his way through the driving storm to the nook under the sheltering cliff and had, seemingly, by instinct, found Betty Hunt rather than Nell Blossom.

Joe told himself that this very fact—that he had stumbled upon Betty rather than Nell—was a miracle of love.

All the time they were beating through the blizzard, crossing the icy river and climbing the steep path, it seemed to Joe that Betty had been calling to him. It had been the most natural thing in the world that at the end of the fearful struggle he should find in his arms the girl whom he loved and whose peril had caused him such anguish.

And Betty did, quite of her own volition, enter that shelter. It was no mistake, no chance happen-

ing. Betty did not think he was her brother. "Oh, Joe! I was sure you would find us," she had said.

Joe did not overlook the confession Betty had made that there was a man back East who must, in some way, hold her promise if not her affections. But Joe hoped that by now Betty had taken time to compare that unknown with himself; and that he, Joe, had a chance. He decided to await Betty's good pleasure.

At least, Joe Hurley's recklessness was submerged once more in those better qualities that the Reverend Willett Ford Hunt warmly liked. Joe was bound to be the parson's chief assistant and backer in all his efforts for the betterment of Canyon Pass. And Hunt faced now—he had seen it coming of course—a situation that must practically make effective or mar seriously all that he had striven for since he had come West.

This emergency came up for discussion that Saturday night in Bill Judson's Three Star Grocery. The interest of the more decent element of the town's population was centering in the church and in Parson Hunt's work. This was a rallying point for all progressive effort and determination in Canyon Pass.

In addition, the happenings of the past week seemed to have focused on Hunt and the good work the eyes of all those Passonians who possessed vision at all. The almost tragic brawl in Tolley's Grub

Stake had aroused a great deal of warm discussion. What did Canyon Pass and Canyon County have a sheriff for, if roughnecks were to go armed—and use those arms—just as they had been wont to do in the old days?

“Why, we’re plumb civilized now. We ain’t supposed to go around wearin’ shootin’-irons and plug-in’ holes in store-fronts and citizens’ hats. If a bunch of cow-punchers came riotin’ in yere and started to shoot up the camp, Sheriff Blaney would show ’em what-for, blame sudden.”

“Youbetcha!” agreed one of the storekeeper’s listeners. “That’s a true word, Bill. If a man means to be peaceable, why go ironed at all?”

“That’s just it,” complained the gangling Smithy. “There’s them that ain’t for peace. That’s why the rest of us hafter go heeled.”

Smithy had been waiting on customers with a gun belted to his waist ever since the night he had lost two teeth and gained a black eye. Perhaps the evidence of this gun so prominently displayed had saved the gangling clerk from much hectoring comment that he might otherwise have suffered from some of the patrons of the Three Star.

However, Smithy basked in a certain heroic light. He had been the first to resent Tolley’s scurrilous tale about Nell Blossom, and no matter what Joe Hurley and the parson had done later, Smithy’s small share of glory could not be ignored. On this very

afternoon Nell herself had come into the Three Star Grocery and thanked Smithy very sweetly for his courageously expressed opinion on her behalf, the result of which had rather marred what good looks Smithy had ever been able to lay claim to.

"Layin' off whatever that boy's mother said about him when he was an infant," drawled Judson, "nobody ever could honestly say that Smithy should take a medal for good looks. Now he looks plumb woeful! I come pretty near bustin' out crying when I look at him."

"Oh, it's not as bad as all that, Bill Judson, and you know it," Nell declared. "Don't you believe him, Smithy. I don't think it hurts your looks any."

"It couldn't," was Judson's grim comment.

But this missed Smithy. He fairly gasped with pleasure at Nell's statement.

"Don't you mind about it, Miss Nell," he said. "I was goin' to have them teeth drawed, anyway. I'll get gold ones. And I'd have 'em all knocked out if 'twould do you a mite of good."

Now that the conclave between the serious-minded citizens had begun, even Smithy was listened to with some respect. Besides, the gangling one put forward an unmistakably pregnant fact.

"If it wasn't for Tolley and his gang, wouldn't none of us hafter tote guns," Smithy observed.

"Surest thing you know!" exclaimed Collins.

"Run them out o' town and the decent men here wouldn't hafter develop saddle-galls from wearing ten pound or more of iron and lead belted around their waists. Yes, sir! I'm in favor of reviving the old vigilance committee and running these yere undesirable citizens out into the Topaz."

"What would become of them?" put in Hunt mildly.

"Let 'em 'root, hog, or die'!" muttered Judson. "Tolley, of course, has got a stake yere. We can't take a man's property away from him. But those hangers-on of his——"

"It is a part of Tolley's stake that is the immediate cause of this discussion, gentlemen," put in the parson again. "Tolley still owns the place in which we hold our meetings, and Judson's lease will soon run out."

"Run Tolley out," said Smithy, who had now enthusiastically taken sides with the church people, "and you needn't worry about that shack."

"Maybe he would sell," Hurley suggested.

"You try to buy it," and Judson grinned. "His eye teeth has done been cut a far time back. Tolley ain't that kind of a fool. He is wise to the idea that we'd like to buy that place. If you paved the shack floor with gold eagles Tolley wouldn't bite."

"He'd like to bust up the church and run the parson out, if you ask me," was the comment of

another bystander. "And he's got a sharp side-pardner now, boys. I hear tell Dick the Devil is a-hintin' that things will go different in Canyon Pass, now that he's come back."

"How's that?" asked Hurley quickly, his eyes sparkling as they always did when his temper was ruffled. "What's Dick got to say about it?"

"He don't favor no parson. He says so."

"Looks to me," drawled Judson, "that it's comin' close to a show-down. Either we folks that want a church and decency has got to cave in, or we got to fight."

"The right kind of fighting, I hope," said Hunt quickly. "We must hold our own without open quarreling."

"Well, it won't be peaceful when we try to hold onto Tolley's shack," growled Jib Collins.

"Look yere," queried a voice from the dark end of the store, "what have you shorthorns been doin' all this time you've had a parson? Why ain't ye built him a church?"

"Another county heard from!" snapped Judson, as old Steve Siebert came forward. "Easy enough to ask that."

"Why don't ye answer it?" asked the old prospector. "I see you have got yere in Canyon Pass a blame good parson. I never seen one I liked better. I ain't heard him preach, and I ain't been to your meetin's. But any parson that can walk barehanded

up to a gang like that Boss Tolley and his whelps gets my vote, and he can have everything I've got when he wants it for his church."

"Them that ain't got nawthin' can easy give it away," muttered Judson.

But it was another voice that ruffled the serenity of Steve Siebert. On a box by the door the hooped figure of Andy McCann straightened up.

"I reckon," he sneered, "that that old gray-backed lizard has got him a poke full o' nuggets out in the Topaz, and he's goin' to hand it over for to pay for a church edifice," and his senile giggle was more maddening than the laughter of the crowd.

"I likely brought in full as much as yonder ground-owl ever scooped out o' the ground. But ye don't answer my question, neither. Why ain't you fellers made some preparation for buildin'?"

"Mr. Siebert," said the parson soothingly, "the men and women interested in our work have subscribed several hundred dollars toward a building fund. But we are none of us prepared to finance such a work as yet. We wish to put up a fairly good structure when we get at it. We cannot freight in the frame and heavier timbers. They must be cut and sawn on the spot. The expense of getting in a mill, aside from the labor, is enormous."

"I reckon these hard-shells have tol' you that because their pockets squeal ev'ry time they put their hands in 'em," growled Siebert. "I know 'em."

"Look here, old-timer," said Joe Hurley, sharply, "we figure it will cost close to ten thousand dollars to put up a church. What do you say to that?"

"Put your hand in your poke and hand over ten thousand in dust, you miser'ble desert rat!" cackled Andy McCann.

"And how much of it can you rake up, after prospectin' this country for nigh on to thutty years?" was Steve's answer, glowering at his enemy.

"Wal, dern your hide! there was a time when I might ha' done my share of it without weepin' none," muttered Andy. "And if it hadn't been for you——"

"Is that so?" cried the other old man, his face ablaze with wrath. "And how about me bein' right in sight once't of the most promisin' lead that ever was uncovered in Canyon County?"

"If it hadn't been for you," rejoined Andy, "I would ha' been rollin' in wealth. And you know it—dad burn your hide!"

"Look here," interjected Joe Hurley, interested rather than amused. "If you both tell the truth, you must have together struck a rich streak. Why didn't you develop it? You were partners, weren't you?"

"Me, pardners with that yere!" croaked Steve.

"D'ye think for one moment," demanded Andy, "that I'd help make that feller's fortune? Not on your tintype!"

Here Judson, with enormous disgust, broke into

the discussion. "Dad burn it!" he exclaimed, "this ain't helpin' none to build the parson a church."

The others were laughing uproariously. Steve and Andy glared at each other like two angry dogs with a strong fence between them. But slowly their fierce expressions changed. Hunt, who was watching them with something more than idle curiosity, saw that both old men began to look slyly at each other as they calmed down. The others paid no further attention to Steve and Andy, the flurry of their verbal battle being over. But in the rheumy eyes of Andy there grew a light which seemed to register some secret amusement, while Steve's toothless grin displayed a humorous appreciation of a phase of the argument that the by-standers in general quite failed to catch.

"Now," thought the Reverend Willett Ford Hunt, "I wonder, to use one of Joe's favorite expressions, what those two old fellows have up their sleeves. Perhaps the joke is on Canyon Pass, rather than on these two queer old prospectors. I wonder!"

CHAPTER XXVII

SEVERAL CONCLUSIONS

NELL BLOSSOM had not gone back to sing at Colorado Brown's place. It was some time before Hunt found this out, and he wondered why she had broken her agreement with Colorado, for he knew she had entirely recovered from the effects of her adventure in the storm.

Had the parson asked his sister, Betty might have illuminated his mind not a little regarding this and other mysteries about Nell; but he was chary of ever speaking of the singer in other than a general way before Betty.

To tell the truth, he shrank from any argument regarding the Blossom of Canyon Pass. He had learned just how sweet and innocent Nell Blossom was. But he did not know how far Betty might approve of the younger girl, especially if he showed any personal interest in the latter.

He was firm in his conviction that Nell Blossom was a being set apart as his mate from the beginning! Strange as it might seem at first view, Hunt was positive that he and the half-tamed mining-camp girl held much in common. He had found oppor-

tunity to talk with her of late—both at Mother Tubbs' and elsewhere—and he knew her tastes and aspirations far better than before. She had confided to him, although with much timidity, some of her girlish desires and her conclusions upon topics which she had thought seriously about.

She was, too, of the very stuff these Canyon Pass people were made—one of themselves. If he got Nell Blossom for a wife she would be of greater aid to him in his work here than any other one person possibly could be. With Nell Blossom for his very own, the Reverend Willett Ford Hunt would indeed have won the Heart of Canyon Pass.

Hunt kept all this a secret and said little to Betty about the cabaret singer. Nothing indeed that gave her a chance to tell him that her eyes had seen already most of what he thought was hidden from her, and seen it in a single glance.

As her brother sat beside the bed the day of the ice-storm and held Nell Blossom's hand, Betty saw how it was with the Reverend Willett Ford Hunt. The only matter that puzzled her at all was Nell's possible attitude. Unsophisticated as the mining-camp girl was, Betty could not know for sure what Nell's feeling for the parson was.

But Betty might have given Hunt a pretty correct explanation of why Nell did not go back to sing at Colorado Brown's place. The girls were to-

gether almost every day after their adventure in the storm.

Betty did not go to Mother Tubbs'. She scarcely left the hotel at all in the day time, though going out on the first Sunday following their perilous adventure to attend church service.

But Nell came to the Wild Rose, and the two girls grew to know each other better than before. This because they both wished a closer understanding. Nell had begun to admire something about Betty Hunt besides her frocks and the way she manicured her nails. The parson's sister now desired to know Nell better for the parson's sake.

"I'm sick to death, Betty, singing for those rough-necks," Nell had burst forth on one occasion. "I used to think it was great to have 'em cheer me and clap me off and have 'em throw money at me. But I'm plumb sick of it."

"It's a great gift to be able to move people with one's voice so."

"It ain't nothing of the kind!" Nell declared vehemently. "It's because they ain't got no brains—at least, what they've got are addled with hootch. I've only got just a nice, sweet, singing voice. Them fellers are so plumb ignorant that they hoot and holler for me because I please 'em. I'd love to be really able to sing!"

"I am not so sure that you cannot sing, as you mean it," was Betty's sympathetic rejoinder. "Merely,

you do not sing worth-while songs—together."

"I'm mighty ashamed about singing that 'This Is No Place for a Minister's Son,' " burst out Nell suddenly.

"Why, I think it's funny," and Betty laughed. "I've often heard Ford humming it."

"Oh! I—I sang it at him, Betty. I did!"

"I am quite sure it never disturbed Ford in the least."

"Well, no, I reckon not. Nothing a girl like me done——"

"Did!"

"*Did*—could bother a man like Parson Hunt."

"I am not so sure of that," Betty rejoined, eyeing the other girl keenly.

But Nell Blossom, if she had a secret, hid it successfully. Betty did not miss the opportunity, however, of trying to help her friend.

"Suppose you learn some better songs—some really worth-while pieces? I brought my music with me, although I do not know if I shall ever touch a piano again." She sighed. "But I sometimes sit and hum over my favorites. You read music of course, Nell?"

"I don't know a note—to speak the name of it, I mean," confessed the singer. "But I never saw the piece yet that I couldn't pick up pretty easy. Rosabell Pickett says I'm a natural sight-reader with a great ear for harmony."

She accepted with gratitude the selections Betty made from her library. Betty had chosen the songs with some little guile. That fact was proved by what occurred later.

"Anyway," Nell concluded, "I ain't going back to Colorado's place for a while. I got some money, and Sam's bringing his pay home to Mother Tubbs pretty reg'lar now. I can live for a while without singing for those roughnecks, that's a sure thing!"

But Betty had her own grave thoughts—thoughts that kept her awake at night. Hollow eyes and certain twitching lines about her sensitive mouth were the result of these secret cogitations. Hunt noticed his sister's changed appearance but he misunderstood its source. He feared that Betty found the life at Canyon Pass, with winter coming on, too hard to bear. Yet he saw that she always cheered up when Joe Hurley ran in to see them.

The Eastern girl's trouble did not arise from the locality in which she was forced to live; it was the presence of one person in the town that caused her such serious thoughts. The man who had passed Nell Blossom and her in the storm, whose unexpected appearance had made Nell faint, had shocked Betty much more deeply than he did the singer!

Without that heavy mustache, with his waving hair cut more to conform to Eastern ideas of propriety, the girl visualized the fellow as she had once known Andy Wilkenson. He was the man, thought

of whom had so worried Betty's mind for these long months since she had left Grandhampton Hall. Andy Wilkenson! The man she had hoped never to see or hear from again. Her worst fears on coming West were now realized. And his reappearance here at Canyon Pass warned Betty that she could never allow Joe Hurley to see just how much she had learned to care for him.

She went to church on that next Sunday morning in fear and trembling. She sat well forward as usual. But she knew when "Dick Beckworth" came in and sat down in one of the rear seats.

His coming here surprised them all. Heads were turned, and there was whispering. Dick was dressed in the same flashy way, for he had left a trunk at the Grub Stake when he went away in the spring. He sat during the sermon with a sneer on his handsome face and the dancing light of the demon flickering in his hard eyes. Hunt usually met strangers after the meeting with a cordial handclasp. He did not approach Dick Beckworth.

Betty drew a veil across her face before she arose for the benediction. She waited to return to the hotel with her brother.

She was the only person in the assembly who was not amused by the appearance of the two old prospectors, Siebert and McCann, at the service. They did not come in together; and when Andy McCann entered to see Steve seated at one side, he chose a

seat just as far from the other old-timer as he could and on the other side of the house. Their scowls turned on each other were more significant than words.

Hunt did not let Steve and Andy get away without a personal word with them.

"I am very glad to welcome you among us, Mr. McCann," he said to that individual when he shook the pocket-hunter's wrinkled claw.

"Wal, it's all right, I reckon," muttered Andy. "In a meetin' you've got to stand for most anybody droppin' in. But that old rip," nodding toward the distant Steve, "would look a heap better 'cordin' to my idee in jail than at church."

"We must be charitable, Mr. McCann," said the parson, moving toward the other prospector.

Old Steve was quite as bitter in his comment. But he added something, too, that gave Hunt pause.

"It seems a good deal like old times. I used to go to church reg'lar, onc't," said Siebert. "But I miss something, parson—I sure do."

"What's that?" asked Hunt smiling.

"Let alone I never expected to see that old has-been at meetin'—an' I don't reckon he's come for any good—I see you don't look jest like a preacher ought to look. Say, don't ministers dress different no more from other folks? You might be a banker or a gambler as far as your coat goes to show."

The blunt criticism shocked Hunt not a little. Up

to this time he had carefully eschewed clerical dress. He began to wonder if, after all, he was not making a mistake.

Dick Beckworth was not on the street when the parson and his sister went back to the hotel. In fact Dick had slipped out very soon after the meeting ceased and was then in conference with Boss Tolley in the little office at the end of the long bar in the Grub Stake.

"Well," said Tolley, eagerly, "did you see her?"

"Sure as sure."

"Is it her?" demanded the dive keeper, grinning like a wolf.

"It sure is. It's her that was Betty Hunt."

"Dad burn it! And she paradin' 'round here like an unmarried woman. Dick, we got that parson on the hip."

CHAPTER XXVIII

CATASTROPHE

No more snow or ice had followed that first sharp, furious blizzard; but with the higher temperature had come heavy rainstorms which the natives declared were quite unseasonable. The rivers were bank full. The lower end of Main Street was washed by the water from both Forks. Several families had been obliged to move into the higher part of the town.

But the flood had not driven Mother Tubbs and her little family out of their home. The wise old woman did not know just why Nell Blossom sang no more at the dance hall; but in her mind she knew that "suthin' was workin' on that gal." Meanwhile she proceeded to "work on" Sam as usual.

Rocking on her back porch with the vista of dreary yards under her eye, but the rugged beauties of the Topaz Range in the distance, she philosophized as usual on all things both spiritual and mundane. Sam was pottering about a broken table that she had convinced him he must mend before he left the premises for a stroll into the town, it being Saturday afternoon.

"I must say, too, that it seems as peaceful as Sunday back in Missouri—or pretty near," Mother Tubbs observed. "Things is changed yere in Canyon Pass. Ye must admit it, Sam."

"Drat it!" snarled her husband, sucking a thumb he had just smashed with his hammer. "I admit it all right. The Pass is gettin' plumb wuthless to live in. Psalm singin', and preachin', and singin' meetings, and sech. Huh! Parson wants me to come to Bible class."

After all he said it with some pride. Sam had, as he expressed it, "a sneakin' likin' " for the parson. But he was determined not to show that this was so before Mother Tubbs.

"Ain't you glad to live less like a savage—more decent and civilized like—than you useter, Sam Tubbs?" demanded the old woman.

"I was satisfied as I was," grunted her husband. "I ain't one o' them that's always wantin' change and somethin' new. If I had been, I'd picked me a new woman before now."

"The pickin' ain't very good in Canyon Pass," rejoined Mother Tubbs complacently. "Them that's got husbands don't want to exchange. 'Twould be like jumpin' out of the skillet onto the coals. Them women that ain't got nary man are well content, I reckon, to get on without one if you, Sam Tubbs, are the only hope they got."

"Huh!"

Nell's sweet, clear voice floated down from the upper chamber. In accents that caressed, she sang an old song which she had found in Betty Hunt's music, arranged for solo use.

"Hear that child, Sam!" whispered the old woman, wiping her eyes when the pleading verse was finished. "Ain't that heaven-born?"

"Huh!" said Sam, but in truth a little doubtfully. "I never considered our Nell as bein' pertic'lar angelic. No ma'am! Not before."

"She's as good as any angel," declared Mother Tubbs with conviction. "Only she's flighty. Or useter be. And if she'd just go and sing them songs at meetin', Canyon Pass would learn for once just what good singin' is."

"I dunno but you're right, old woman," said Sam softly, as the voice from above took up the song again. "I've heard Nell Blossom sing many a time before; but it never so sort o' caught in muh cogs as that song does. But she can't sing them kind o' tunes in Colorado Brown's or the Grub Stake."

"Hush, Sam! Don't mention it!" whispered his wife. "I hope to the Lord she won't never hafter work in them places again."

"Huh! How's she going to live?" asked the startled Sam.

"You leave it to Parson Hunt," declared Mother Tubbs in the same secretive way, "and Nell Blossom won't never no more hafter sing for her livin'."

Sam stared. His bald head flushed as his eyes began to twinkle and the knowing grin wreathed his sunken lips. He suddenly burst into a cackle of delight.

"D'ye mean it? The parson? By mighty! So he's willin' to go the way of all flesh, is he? Nell needn't work no more for her livin' if she don't want?"

"You poor fool," scornfully said his wife, holding up one of his enormous blue yarn socks with a gaping hole in the heel, "if the parson is as hard on his socks as you are, Sam Tubbs, Nell will have her work cut out for her—sure as sure!"

It was the very next night that Nell Blossom sang for the first time at the Canyon Pass church service. She had been twice to morning service before this, coming in alone, refusing to sit near Mother Tubbs or Betty, and remaining silent even through the hymns. In truth, she had never learned those hymns that chanced to be given out on those occasions. Rosabell Pickett did yeoman's service at the badly tuned piano; but her own voice had the sweetness of a crow with the carrying power of that same non-soothing bird. Rosabell kept the hymns going; but sometimes Hunt could have wished for even Miss Pelter of the Ditson Corners' choir to carry the air!

As has been said, the Sunday evening service at Tolley's old shack was not so formal as the morn-

ing session. Hunt tried in the evening to lead the singing himself. He had managed through the summer to teach the young folks several of the newer and more sprightly songs out of the collection he had brought with him from the East. Some of the rougher young men who filled the rear benches in the evening were glad to make a noise with something besides their heavy boots, and they "went in" for the singing with gusto.

On this evening Nell came in with Mother Tubbs and Sam, but she sat down on the front bench between Betty and Rosabell Pickett. She handed some sheets of music to Rosabell, and Betty recognized them with a flush of pleasure. It was plain that the accompanist had been prepared for Nell's new move.

"Do you think Mr. Hunt would let me sing a song?" whispered Nell to Betty.

"Let you!" returned Betty eagerly. "He'll love you for it."

Perhaps the emphatic statement was made by the parson's sister without thought of how it sounded. Nell's flower-like face warmed to a flush that spread from the collar of her blouse to the waving tendrils of hair under her hat brim. She hid her face quickly from Betty. The latter, perhaps somewhat wickedly, enjoyed the other girl's confusion. Her heart had suddenly expanded to Nell and her brother Ford. If she saw no happiness ahead of her in life, Betty

Hunt had begun to hope that the Reverend Willett Ford Hunt and the Canyon Pass blossom would realize all the happiness that a loving pair could compass.

With a whisper and a head shake Betty informed the parson of what he might expect from Nell at this meeting. Her presence had already filled Hunt's heart with singing. Now, before his talk to the congregation—it was not a sermon—he smiled at Nell and sat down while she sang the song she had prepared and that had so stirred the hearts of Mother Tubbs and Sam the day before.

Rosabell Pickett for once got the spirit of the composition. She played the accompaniment softly, and she slurred over the sour notes of the old piano. When Nell stood up a hush of expectancy fell upon the congregation. Even the boot-scrappings from the back benches were silenced.

Never had Canyon Pass heard Nell Blossom sing so sweetly. The girl's tones fairly gripped the heart-strings of her hearers and wrung them. The tears rolled down good old Mother Tubbs' face. Sam sat beside her, looking straight ahead more like a gargoyle than ever, afraid to wink for fear the salt drops would carom from his bony cheeks. Steve Siebert in his corner, and Andy McCann in his—as far apart as the width of the room would allow—looked like their burros, carved out of desert rock. Nothing seemed to move those old fellows. But the

rest of the congregation—even the roughnecks on the back seats—were subdued when the song was done.

After the service Hunt apprehended a new note in the manner and speech of his flock. He scarcely realized that his own talk had been more spiritual than usual because of the emotion roused within him by Nell's song. There was a hush over the room. The noisy fellows went out on tiptoe. Voices were subdued. For almost the first time the atmosphere of this rough room where they "held meetings" had become that of a real house of worship.

"Steve Siebert is right," the parson told himself not without gravity. "It is time that I should show my own respect beyond peradventure for the religion I preach. Betty must shake the mothballs out of that coat."

Lizard Dan tooled his six mules across the East Fork. The water was more than waist deep, and the beasts swam for part of the way, and the inside passengers sat on the small of their backs with their boots up on the cross-straps. The driver urged the team with voice and whip up the muddy rise to the Wild Rose. His desert-stained face was full of wrinkles of excitement. Joe Hurley, who chanced to be lingering at the door of the hotel, spied the emotion in the bus-driver's countenance.

"What's got you, old-timer?" asked the mining

man, strolling down to the step below the driver. "Something on the road over from Crescent City bite you?"

"I got bit all right," growled Lizard Dan. He stooped to put his tobacco stained lips close to Joe's ear. "The sheriff of Cactus County rode over on the seat with me. Yeppy! And he dropped off back yonder to talk to Sheriff Blaney."

"Something doing?"

"Youbetcha! The Cactus County sheriff was teli-in' me. He's been after a guy that turned a trick last summer—fore part of the summer in fact—'way out beyond Hoskins. He was some pretty shrewd short-card tin-horn, if you ask me."

"A gambler? Anybody know him?" asked Joe quite idly.

"I didn't get his name. The sheriff was pumpin' me a lot about who was new—if any—in Canyon Pass. I told him," and Dan grinned widely, "that 'bout the newest citizens we had yere was Parson Hunt and his sister."

"You're some little josher, aren't you, Dan?" said Joe, grimly. "What had the feller done?"

"The one the sheriff's after? Cleaned out a sheep camp with marked cards and then made his get-away under a gun. Cool as the devil! Shot one of those sheepticks—I mean to say, a shepherd. Never did have much use for sheep men——"

"Me neither," admitted Hurley.

"But they are ha'f human—leastways, that's how I look at 'em," pursued Lizard Dan. "They should have their chance. Marked cards and a gun is no way to win their spondulicks. No, sir."

"What makes the Cactus County officer think the sharper came this way?"

"Says he and a posse follered him to the Canyon County line, up yonder, 'long back in the summer. They figgered he'd gone Lamberton way, so they swayed off and didn't come yere. Now something new has come up about the feller, I take it, and the Cactus County sheriff has come yere to get Blaney to help comb this part of the territory. I told him we didn't have no loose gamblers yere. They all got jobs and have held 'em some time."

"Tolley is always picking up new hombres," said Hurley thoughtfully. "I can't keep run of all the scabby customers he brings in here."

"But not card-sharps," said Lizard Dan, shaking his head. "He ain't got a new dealer in a dog's age. You wouldn't count Dick Beckworth one. It's just like he's always been yere."

He waddled away with the mail sacks and his large-bore gun. Hurley found himself suddenly startled by an entirely uncalled-for thought. Surely nothing Lizard Dan had said should have inspired this:

Dick Beckworth had been away from Canyon Pass from the early springtime until recently. He

had ridden in from the wilderness on the occasion of the first blizzard. Where had the gambler been during the months he was missed at the Grub Stake?

Hurley was half tempted to go to the Grub Stake and make an inquiry or two, but since that notable night when Steve Siebert had held up Tolley and his gang, Joe had seldom been inside the place. He did, however, wander along the now quiet street toward the honkytonk.

It was drawing toward evening, and a drizzle of rain, which had threatened all day, swept across the West Fork and muffled the town almost instantly as in a gray blanket. The roar of Runaway River in the canyon blew back into Joe's ears and made him deaf to most other sounds.

But as he crossed the mouth of the alley beside Tolley's place he heard a sharp "Hist!" He turned to look. A girl, wrapped in a fluttering cloak, stood there, dimly revealed in the thicker darkness of the alley.

"Well, what do you want?" demanded the mining man.

"Mr. Hurley!"

"Great saltpeter! what's the matter, Rosy?"

"Hush! Shet your yawp!" warned the piano player. "Want to get me into trouble?"

"Not a bit. What's up?"

"I don't know. But it's something—something bad."

"Bad? About whom?"

"Parson Hunt and his sister Betty."

"Betty Hunt?" muttered the mining man with an emphasis that would have told a woman of much less discernment than Rosabell Pickett all that was necessary.

"Yeppy. You like her, Joe Hurley. You want to look out for her. Somebody has got to. That Dick Beckworth——"

"Dick the Devil?"

"You said it! He's got something on her."

"He's got something on Betty Hunt? Never!"

"No use layin' your hand on your gun butt. It needs something besides that. When fire's touched to the end of the fuse, no use tryin' to stamp on the ashes. It is burning toward the powder barrel. The thing's started. Dick's told it about her——"

"Told what?" asked Hurley, almost shaking the girl.

"That she was married back East, long before she come out here, and is posing here as an unmarried woman. He says he knows the man that was married to her."

Hurley was stricken dumb for the moment. Yet recovery was swift. He stammered:

"She—she might. It's no crime. She—she might have got a divorce and taken her maiden name again,

if it's true. But I wouldn't take Dick the Devil's word as to the color of the blue sky."

"He's got a paper to prove it. I seen him show it to Boss Tolley. I run to get you. I saw you at the Wild Rose. I figger you are the one to tell the parson."

"And who's to tell Betty?" Joe inquired. "I—I——"

"Oh! What's that?" exclaimed Rosabell, shrinking away. "I—I thought it was thunder."

A muttering sound grew in Hurley's hearing, but he paid little attention to it at first. Was it this Betty had meant all the time, when she had kept him at arm's length? When she had told him that there was somebody back East who, at least, had her promise?

Then the air quaked as though there had been a volcanic upheaval within the immediate district of Canyon Pass. Rosabell shrieked and ran back into the gloom, disappearing toward the rear door of the Grub Stake. Joe ran out into the street, seeing other men coming from the shops and saloons.

His gaze by chance was turned upon the wagon track down the slope beyond the West Fork. He saw a flaming patch of white there. It came down the wagon track with terrific speed. In a moment he realized that it was a white pony and rider.

Lashing the steed the rider forced it into the West Fork. The animal had to swim for it. It seemed

as though the stream had filled terrifically within the last few minutes.

Out of the flood scrambled the pony. It was not until then that anybody recognized Nell Blossom and her cream-colored mount. She urged the horse up into the town and they heard her clear voice rising above the sullen thunder of the three rivers:

“The Overhang! The Overhang! It’s down—it’s filled the canyon! Runaway River is stoppered like with a cork in the neck of a bottle. The flood is coming!”

CHAPTER XXIX

HIS LAST CARD

HUNT lingered in his sister's room after Joe Hurley had left them. They were talking when Maria came up to take away the tea things. The Mexican woman was greatly excited.

"Those bad men! She get it now—in the neck you say, si? My goodness, yes! He no run you out of town lak' he say, Señor Hunt."

"Who is this who wants to run me out?" asked Hunt good-naturedly. "I must be getting awfully unpopular in some quarters."

"Those bad man at Tolley's Grub Stake. Ah, yes, Señor! She hate you—my goodness, yes!"

Betty began to be troubled—as she always was when she heard her brother's peace threatened.

"Have you heard something new, Maria?" she asked the woman.

"Cholo, he hear. He come just now from the sheriff. A man come to town and he say he want those bad man."

"What bad man? Not my brother?" cried Betty.

"*Madre de Dios!* Is the Señor Hunt bad?" gasped Maria. "Why, it is Dick the Deevil I say."

"Ah-ha!" muttered Hunt, with more interest than surprise. He did not look at Betty. "This man has something against Dick Beckworth?"

"Cholo whisper to me, jus' now, before I come up here, that the sheriff weel arres' Dick the Deevil. For robbery and swindle, you say. Si!"

"This is news!" ejaculated Hunt, putting on his coat and hat. "I must go down and get the particulars."

"Oh, Ford!"

What Betty might have said—how much she might have betrayed of her secret to her brother at that moment—will never be known. Before he could turn to look at her anguished face the house shook, and an atmospheric tremor seemed to pass over the town. An "airquake" was the better term for it! And with it they heard a continuous thundering roar that seemed to mingle with, yet almost drown, the chorus of the rivers which had been a monotone in their ears all day.

Maria screamed and flew out of the room. Hunt exclaimed:

"Something's blown up at one of the mines, perhaps. But Joe is all right. He could not have got far away from the hotel."

It was not until he ran down and reached the street that he learned the truth. Nell had pulled in her wet and exhausted pony before the hotel and was

surrounded by the excited populace. Joe was with her, and Hunt, seeing both safe, was relieved.

The parson listened to her story with amazement and some of the dread that the older inhabitants of Canyon Pass felt. Something like this had happened twenty years before. She had seen a great landslide—a large part of the Overhang she thought—fall into the canyon. Already the rivers were backing up. Filled as they were by the recent unseasonable rains, the flood, if the canyon bed was really closed by the landslide, would soon rise into the town.

Hunt and Hurley joined a party that launched a big batteau to go down the Runaway to the first turn in the canyon wall to see just what the danger was. Most of the other inhabitants of Canyon Pass were crowding into Main Street. It might be that all would have to get back to the headlands where the mines were in order to escape the flood.

Betty, alone in her room in the hotel, saw the people milling about below and could only guess what it meant. She did not dare go down to ask about the catastrophe, and Maria did not return. But as she sat there, trembling not altogether from fear of what might happen to the town, she saw the knob of her door turn slowly. There was somebody in the hall—somebody coming in!

In her terror—terror of she knew not what—the girl could not move. She could only watch the frail

door sag slowly open. She saw a hand with a sparkling diamond upon it. But it was a man's hand. A shoulder appeared as the door was thrust farther inward.

Then she saw the face of the intruder.

"Andy Wilkenson!"

Betty did not know that her voice was audible. But as the man slid in with the sleekness of a cat and closed the door behind him, he whispered:

"So you know me all right, do you? Then that makes it easier. You've got to hide me, Betty. They are after me. I got out of the Grub Stake through a window—just in time."

He laughed. There was a reckless gayety in his manner that was forced; but it seemed to Betty more terrible than if he had shown fear.

"You wouldn't want them to get your husband, would you, honey?" he went on, his back against the door, his eyes glittering. "And there's going to be high water. I can't get away at once. I've got to hide. You'll have to keep me here." He chuckled. "A girl wouldn't give her hubby up to the sheriff, would she? I——"

"Go away!" she gasped.

"Not a chance!" exclaimed Dick lightly. "That sheriff will comb the town. But he will never come into your bedroom, honey. And I'm going to stay here till the flurry is over."

He took a step into the room. Betty shrank from

him. Her eyes were now aflame—and there was something besides fear in them.

“I will give you time to get out, Andy Wilken-son,” she said hoarsely. “But no more. All I have to do is to raise this window and scream——”

“Dare to!” he snapped. “I’ll stay right here. You’re my wife——”

“Nobody will believe that if I deny it!” she exclaimed.

“So you think I can’t prove it?” He laughed again. “I know that you would deny it if you could. I know that you even tore up the marriage certificate that old minister gave you. But I went back to him and got a copy. And I have got a copy of the license record, and all. Think I’m a fool? You may have fooled me about your aunt’s money; but one never knows when such a moment as this may come. If you give me up to the sheriff, I’ll tell ’em all just who and what you are. Mrs. Andy Wilken-son! Sounds good, don’t it? And ‘Andy Wilken-son’ is Dick Beckworth. Being married under an assumed name don’t make the tie any less binding, Betty. You are married to me hard and fast, and I’m going to turn the fact to good account. Don’t doubt it!”

“I—I’ll call my brother,” said Betty weakly.

“I bet he doesn’t know, either. Nor that Joe Hurley you’ve been chumming around with,” and Dick chuckled hugely. “Oh, I’ve got you, my girl. You

had the chance to call me, and call me good, that time. But it's my turn now. You are going to hide me here, and then help me get away. I know your breed. You'd die rather than let the story of our marriage get to the people of Canyon Pass."

The girl sat huddled in the chair by the window. She stared at him with an intensity of horror that seemed to have paralyzed her whole body. And what he said—his final declaration—she knew was true.

She would much rather die than have it revealed to all Canyon Pass that Dick the Devil was the discarded husband of the Reverend Willett Ford Hunt's sister!

The smile with which Dick watched the agonized girl marked the cruelty that was the underlying trait of his whole character. He knew she suffered. He knew how she suffered now. And he exulted in it.

But he was, too, fearful for his own safety. The crime he had committed miles away across the sheep range, and which had set the sheriff on his track, was a most despicable one. It was, too, in this community a crime that might easily excite the passions of the rougher element. Men had been lynched for much less than Dick Beckworth's crime!

With night coming on, the waters about the town rising, and no means for quick egress before morning at least, Dick the Devil realized that his only hope lay with this tortured girl. Aside from the

satisfaction it gave him to make her shield him, he was quite aware that no better place than Betty Hunt's room could be imagined in which he might hide from the officers.

"There's a closet," he said finally, seeing the small door in the partition. "Put me in that. You can let your brother in if you like—or Joe Hurley." He sneered at her. "They'll never believe the proper Betty Hunt has a man hidden in her room. What's that?"

He hissed the question, grabbing the handle of the closet door, and looked back at the one opening from the hall. There was a light step outside; the door-knob rattled.

"Quick!" breathed Dick. "Don't say a word——"

He tried to open the closet door. Although it was a spring latch, it was likewise locked. All Betty's little valuables were in the closet, and she had the key.

"The key!" shrilled the man. "You fool! Do you want me to give the thing away? As sure as you are alive I'll tell them you're my wife. Quick!"

Betty did not move. She shook her head. The door-knob was again rattled. A muffled voice cried: "Betty!"

The knob turned—as it had before, slowly, hesitatingly. The door was pushed inward. Dick the Devil snatched a pistol from its sling under his left

armpit, with the motion of a rattlesnake about to strike.

Nell Blossom stepped into the room and closed the door swiftly behind her. She had seen Betty. Her cry of "Betty! what's happened?" was answered by a sigh from Dick of such relief that it seemed like a sob.

Alert as she could be, Nell wheeled to look at the man. Although there was no light in the room and the evening was drawing on, the singer knew that half-crouching figure at first glance. She saw, too, the flash of the weapon in the gambler's hand.

"Dick Beckworth! I might have known you'd come sneaking to a girl's room to hide," said Nell, her voice quite unshaken. "Put away that gun. I'm not the sheriff."

Dick was silent. But he had the grace to put away his gun. Nell said to Betty:

"Has he scared you, honey? Don't you mind. Dick the Devil has got his comeupance this time, I reckon. The minute he steps out of this house they'll nab him. Somebody saw him sneak in by the back way. But nobody thought of his daring to come into your room. Come on, you, get out! Take your miserable carcass off to some other part of the house."

"Oh, Nell!" breathed Betty.

"Don't you be afraid, honey," said the cabaret singer again. "This rascal knows me, I reckon.

It's too bad he wasn't killed—like I thought he was—back last spring when I was fool enough to be caught by his sleek ways and talk. Oh, yes! I played the fool. And I come pretty near believing since that time that there wasn't any decent men in the world. All because of that whelp."

For once Dick Beckworth had nothing to say. At another time he might have flouted the girl. But the moment was not propitious. He stood and glared from Nell to Betty, and back again; but said nothing.

"Come! Beat it!" said Nell harshly. "Don't you hear me?"

"I am going to remain here," Dick said in a low voice. "Right here."

"Not much!" Nell wheeled to open the door. "I'll call 'em up. They are watching for you below."

"Nell!" gasped Betty.

"You better speak for me," sneered Dick. "I don't reckon that you two girls will turn me over to the sheriff. Don't forget, Nellie, that once I was your honey-boy."

The mining-camp girl's whole person seemed to fire under this spur. Her face blazed. She was tense with wrath—wrath that she could not for the moment audibly express.

But when she did speak her voice was as hard as ice and her accents as cold:

"Dick Beckworth, you get out of here! March!"

"Not much."

Nell had been riding. She never went abroad on horseback without wearing her belt and gun. The latter flashed into her hand too quickly for Dick to have again produced his weapon, had he so desired.

"Put 'em up!" was Nell's concise command. "Don't flutter a finger wrong. I been thinking for months that I saw you go over that cliff to your death. Maybe I worried some over being the possible cause of your taking that drop. But I feel a whole lot different about you now, Dick Beckworth. Keep your hands up and march out of this room."

The man, sneering, his countenance torn with emotion, his eyes as glittering as those of an angered serpent, came forward into the middle of the room again. He was staring at Betty rather than at Nell. He said to the former:

"You going to let me go out, Betty?"

"Oh! Oh! I——"

"Don't mind even to answer him—the dog!" Nell muttered. "I swear, after this, I would not lift a hand to stop the boys from stringing him up."

"Is that so?" queried Dick, turning to her again. "You think you've got things your own way, don't you? I'll show you. Betty! tell this girl what and who I am and why I am not going to leave this

room. Tell her, my dear, why you can't bear to see me given up to the sheriff."

"You dog!" ejaculated Nell.

"Tell her, Betty," commanded Dick, but without raising his voice.

The parson's sister, fairly writhing in her chair, put up her clasped hands to Nell. She whispered brokenly:

"Don't—don't send him out. Don't tell, Nell. I—I couldn't bear it!"

"In the name of common sense," queried the singer, "what do you mean? This fellow's frightened you out of your wits."

"No, no! For my sake——"

"You're crazy. He can't hurt you. I have him under my gun. If he makes a move——"

"Betty!" shot in Dick.

"For Ford's sake let him stay!" begged Betty, and sank back in her chair again, almost at the point of collapse.

CHAPTER XXX

CLEARING SKIES

BETTY HUNT had, after all, retained her self-possession in a considerable degree throughout this trying interview. Dick Beckworth's appearance had startled her; but already she had schooled her mind to expecting an interview with him.

Really, the coming of Nell Blossom and what had followed her entrance had disturbed Betty more than Dick's appearance. But now she had got a clutch again upon her mental processes and at this moment, when Dick was about to reveal to the cabaret singer the fact that Betty was his wife, the Eastern girl apprehended and seized upon the plea she believed would, more than any other, cause Nell to let the villain remain without question.

For, with the hotel surrounded and the officers searching for Dick, it was probable that the moment he stepped out of the room he would be caught. So Betty cried:

"For Ford's sake let him stay!"

It was, after all, a shot in the dark. Betty had not been sure up to this moment that Nell really felt toward the parson as his sister knew Hunt felt to-

ward Nell. But she was in a desperate plight. Betty could not bear to have even her girl friend know of her relation to Dick Beckworth, not as Dick would tell it! And if the villain spread the tale as he promised, Betty knew that her brother's work might be greatly injured even in such a community as Canyon Pass.

For after all, although the mining town was not like Ditson Corners, human nature is about the same everywhere. Betty had done nothing disgraceful in marrying Dick Beckworth and leaving him so abruptly. But for hiding the unfortunate alliance and posing here as an unmarried girl, the tongue of gossip would undoubtedly drag both her own name and Ford's through the mire of half-truths and suppositions.

If Nell loved Ford and thought that Dick might reveal something that would injure the parson, Betty hoped the singer would relent. Afterward she could in her own way explain to Nell.

The latter stared now at Betty; but Dick was quite in the line of her gun and her hand did not tremble.

"You—you mean he's got something on the parson?" she asked.

Dick grinned. Betty tried to speak. Before another word could be said, however, there was a sudden outbreak of sound from below and loud voices on the stair.

"Betty!" shouted Joe Hurley's voice.

"Is Nell Blossom there?" called Hunt.

Both young men were tramping up to this very room. They would be here in thirty seconds.

Betty came to her feet as though galvanized by an electric shock. She fumbled in her bosom and drew forth the key of the closet door. She extended it to Dick.

"Let him—let him hide!" she gasped.

Nell lowered her gun. Dick grabbed the key, the grin on his face demoniac, and leaped across the floor on the balls of his feet. In a flash he had the door open, was inside, the door closed and the spring lock snapped. Nell thrust the gun back into its holster. Came a thunderous knock upon the door.

"Girls!" shouted Hunt, "may we come in?"

Betty and Nell looked at each other. The latter sat down on the bed. Betty dropped back into her chair.

"Of course you may come in, Ford," she said in a voice that, if not unshaken, seemed calm to the ears of the men.

Hunt and Hurley, both splashed with mud, appeared at the open door.

"Pack a bag, Betty," said her brother. "The water is backing up into the town, and although we don't believe it will rise high, it may come in over the lower floor. It won't be pleasant here to-night. Joe suggests that we take you both up to his office

at the Great Hope. That can be made comfortable for you until we see just how bad a time Canyon Pass is in for."

"If you say so," said Betty in a low voice. "Will you go, Nell?"

"Sure," declared the other girl.

She thought that probably anything was better for Betty than to remain here. In ten minutes they set forth, hurrying down and out of the hotel. Sheriff Blaney, and a red-faced man whom Betty remembered having seen before on the Hoskins trail hunting a fugitive, was on the porch.

"Derned funny where that Dick Beckworth has holed up," Blaney was saying. "But he can't get out of town to-night, that's sure."

That was a night scarcely to be forgotten in the annals of Canyon Pass. The people streamed up the muddy roads on to the highlands all night long while the waters rose higher and higher. They could hear toward morning the crashing of undermined buildings, but not until dawn did the fugitives learn all the damage of the flood.

Then, just before sunrise, there sounded several tremendous explosions from below, in the canyon. Joe Hurley and a gang of engineers had been down there all night, and the several charges of dynamite they put in at the barrier across the river brought the relief that had been hoped. In an hour a way

was burst through the wall of fallen débris and the mad waters tore a passage to freedom.

The flood began to recede, and by the time the expedition got back from the canyon in the batteau, the mud hole of Main Street could be seen again from the site of the Great Hope. Joe Hurley looked grave, however, when he rejoined his friends in the little shack of an office.

"It's done a sight of damage," the mining man said. "A lot of folks will have to double up till new shacks can be built. The church—Tolley's old place—is standing, Willie."

"I see it is," returned the parson. "But I miss some buildings——"

"You miss one in particular," said his friend quickly. "I don't know but you and Betty are chief among the flood sufferers."

"What do you mean, Joe?" Betty asked quickly.

"The hotel. It was undermined and is in ruins—looks like it had been rammed. Oh!" as he saw Betty pale, "nobody was hurt. Cholo Sam and Maria are safe. Fact is, not a life lost as far as we know. It might have been a whole lot worse. We had great luck."

"Great luck!" murmured Betty, looking at Nell, whose face likewise showed a strange anxiety.

"Talking about luck," added Hurley suddenly. "What do you know about old Steve and Andy? They've been out all night."

"What do you mean?" asked Hunt. "They haven't gone back to the desert?"

"Not on your life. They've been prospecting where they prospected twenty years ago. Or that's what I figger. Just at dawn, after we let off those shots that started the dam-busting, I spied 'em prowling around up there on the side of the canyon. Reckless as kids, those old tykes are. Might another slip come 'most any time."

"Oh!" said Betty, "I hope you did not leave them in danger, Joe."

"If they were, I couldn't help 'em," Hurley replied. "You can't influence those old desert rats any more than you could lead an iron horse to drink. No, sir! Steve and Andy were up there on a shelf that was uncovered by the 'last slip, a-holding hands and ghost-dancing like a couple of Piute Injuns. Acted plumb crazy."

"They must have swum the West Fork to get there. And I bet they didn't go together. But when they got up there and saw the way open——"

"To what?" interrupted Nell. "You haven't told us what they found."

"That's so," chuckled Joe. "They've found something all right. I reckon Steve and Andy can't be fooled when it comes to 'color.' They certainly have made a ten-strike. Steve shouted down to me that the slip had uncovered the mother lode. Of course, they are claiming everything in sight. Got

their claims staked out, and if it's really a sure-enough find I expect there will be a small stampede to that side of the canyon. There's gold all through those cliffs. This is a gold country. Some day they'll find out how to work the Topaz Desert as a paying proposition. The wash from these headlands and the canyon sides has been carried out into the desert by the Runaway for a couple of million years—more or less."

"Anyway," said Nell, her eyes sparkling, "the old-timers are going to be rich at last? How fine!"

"It may only be a pocket—or a broken lead. But I wish 'em both millionaires. Me, I'll stick to the Great Hope a while longer." He looked at Betty. "I am a great feller for sticking to a thing."

Betty blushed and looked away. Hunt said thoughtfully:

"If the slide has only caused Siebert and McCann to be friends again, it has brought about something good—something very good indeed."

"Well, you talk to Judson about that. His stock is pretty near ruined. And see Tolley. He's almost weeping. And Colorado Brown. To say nothing of Cholo Sam, who has lost his hotel."

The girls again looked at each other. There was the same thought in their minds. What had become of Dick Beckworth if the hotel had collapsed? Of course there had been plenty of time for him to have escaped from the building before it went down.

None of the structures had fallen much before day-break. Yet thought of him continued to trouble the girls.

Joe Hurley got Betty off to one side. There was no work being done at any of the mines, so the owner of the Great Hope had nothing to do at this hour. Having been at work all night it might be supposed that he would need sleep; but when he looked on Betty Hunt his gaze was anything but somnolent.

"There's a whole lot been happening in a few short hours, Betty," he said to the parson's sister. "It come on us so quick and it happened so fast that it put out of my head for the time being something I had to say to you."

"Something— Nothing you shouldn't say, Joe?" she stammered, looking at him with pleading eyes.

"I get you, Betty," said the mining man. "I get you—sure. You are warning me off the grass. I don't blame you. You think I am kind of dense, I expect——"

"Oh, never that, Joe," she murmured. "You are kind and thoughtful only."

"I hope you will believe so," said Joe bluntly, "when I tell you I know what your trouble is—and I know there ain't no chance for me now. But I am going to be your friend just as you said I could."

"Oh! Joe, do you know?"

"I got wind of a story Dick Beckworth's been

telling—about your being already married. It's so, isn't it?"

Betty, her face working pitifully, nodded.

"All right. We won't say no more about it. He's a low dog for telling about it. I don't want to know no more—not even who the feller is who married you. But you can bank on me, Betty, every time! I'm your friend."

"I know you are, Joe," she whispered, and the look she gave him paid Joe Hurley for a good deal.

But he was by no means satisfied to consider that Betty Hunt's marriage closed the door of paradise in his face. He was just as determined to get her as ever he had been. He had learned the great thing that he had desired to know. Betty loved him. He had seen it in her look! He could wait, and be patient, and let things take their course. She could be wedded to another man as hard and fast as all the laws could make it. But Joe Hurley felt a glory in his soul that expanded from the heaven-born belief that time would change all that!

They started down into the town, the girls shod with rubber boots that Joe supplied. The people of Canyon Pass were running about like muddy ants seeking their flooded hills. Mother Tubbs and Sam were high and dry in the loft of the stamp mill. The old woman had made Sam lug up there her one good feather-bed—and it was dry. But as she said, she

expected to find all her other possessions "as wet as a frog's hind leg."

Bill Judson lounged in the doorway of the Three Star and hailed them with some cheerfulness.

"There's one sure thing, Parson Hunt," he said. "What I got in cans ain't water-soaked—much. And the cat and six kittens ain't drowned. I expect I can keep shop with what I got left for a while. But Smithy's lost all his clo'es that's fit to wear, dad burn it! I can't have him waitin' on lady customers in a gunny-sack and a pair of ridin' boots."

A little group surrounded Sheriff Blaney on the street as the quartette strolled along. Joe was interested.

"Find him, Blaney?" he asked the officer.

"Not any. And it beats my time. I don't see where that Dick Beckworth could have holed up. He sure didn't get out of town, for the Forks are both plumb impassable for man or beast."

The two girls exchanged glances again. What had happened to Dick Beckworth? Surely he must have got out of the closet—out of the hotel——

Suddenly Betty seized Nell's arm with an hysterical grip.

"Nell! Nell!" she whispered.

"Don't give way. Of course he's all right—though he ought not to be!"

"That closet door! It shut with a spring lock. It could not be opened from inside!"

"Oh, he could smash down the door."

The two young men did not notice the girls' perturbation. They were striding ahead. A crowd was running toward the fallen hotel. Something of moment was happening there. But before they reached the place Cholo Sam saw them, and started toward the parson and Joe.

"Señor Hunt! Señor Joe! Keep the señoritas back. It is not for them to see."

"What's the matter, Sam?" asked Hurley.

"That Dick the Deevil! He ees found—my goodness, yes! They haf just pulled him out of the ruins of my Wild Rose—drowned like one rat!"

Fortunately for Canyon Pass and its flood-harassed inhabitants, frost and snow held off that winter until remarkably late. The mild season gave ample opportunity for new homes to be built and for the necessary repairs to be made upon the structures that had withstood the rising waters.

The supply wagons brought in quantities of necessary goods from Crescent City and the railroads. The mines and washings shut down while all turned to the work of rebuilding. Tolley's Grub Stake and Colorado Brown's place, both swept by the water, were the last buildings to be remodeled. The gamblers and dance-hall girls and other employees of those places left town, for it promised to be a lean winter for their ilk at Canyon Pass.

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In fact, Boss Tolley sold out and got out himself among the very first to desert the town. His departure and the sale of all his property opened the way for Parson Hunt's supporters to buy from the purchaser of Tolley's property the building which had been used for church services and the lot on which it stood.

They could not begin the building of a proper church until spring, of course; but the money was pledged for an edifice that would cost all Joe Hurley had planned.

Hurley himself was able to subscribe a much larger sum than at first, for the Great Hope had proved to be as valuable a mine as he had told Betty and the parson he believed it would. But it was from another source that the church building fund gained its largest contribution.

Old Steve Siebert and Andy McCann had "struck it rich." The romance of the uncovering of a rich vein of gold in the west wall of the canyon is told to-day to every tourist who comes to Canyon Pass.

How, at a time in the camp's early history, two partners who had prospected the Topaz Range and the desert adjoining fruitlessly for years had found traces of gold high up on the canyon wall behind a sheltering ledge and had "locked horns" in their first quarrel over how the lode was to be got at.

At the height of their argument a landslip had buried the hollow where the rich find was located

and, rather than that either should profit by the joint find, the two old fellows had never tried to open the claim until nature, by another freak, uncovered it for them.

"I says to Andy, and Andy says to me," Steve Siebert was wont to recall, "when we seen how rich that lode was, a part of our profits oughter go to the parson and his church."

"You're mighty right we did," agreed Andy. Agreeing was now Andy's strongest trait. "We-all got to pull together in this world. And if we-all pull together yere in Canyon Pass we can have as good a church as any camp needs. We sure got the best parson."

"You're right, Andy," Steve said. "I certainly do despise folks that are always fighting each other and pullin' contrary. No sense in it—no sense a-tall."

In fact the two old fellows became joint treasurers of the church building fund. They took it upon themselves, too, to pass the contribution plates at service. The only friction Andy McCann and Steve Siebert were ever known to display thereafter was a mild rivalry as to the amount of money collected from the congregation seated on their particular sides of the house. It was suspected that each swelled his collection considerably on Sunday mornings so that his half of the house would make the best showing when the offering was counted!

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"Dad burn it!" muttered Bill Judson, "let 'em alone. That's a mild matter for disagreement. They ain't likely to pull no guns on each other over that."

Indeed Canyon Pass was on its good behavior that winter. The exigencies of the flood which had driven out a good deal of the worst element of the town gave the better people a chance to take hold of its government with a firmer hand—and a hand that Hunt and his associates were determined should not again lose its grip. Even Slickpenny Norris in time came to see that religious progress was not actually synonymous with bankruptcy.

To the parson's standard flocked many of those who had before been but lukewarm. Not least of his new helpers was the erstwhile cabaret singer. Nell Blossom proved her value in the work to be quite all that Hunt had hoped.

This busy time, when Joe Hurley and Betty really were so wrapped up in each other that they could scarcely be expected to be of value to anybody but themselves, the parson found in Nell Blossom a willing and efficient aid. They were both earnest in the cause, and so earnest that it seemed they had little thought for extraneous matters. Yet on one occasion when they were looking over the blueprints of the proposed church edifice, Nell slipped an extra sheet of plans into sight from beneath those of the church.

"Why, what is this, Ford?" she asked.

"Oh, yes! I wanted to show you that, Nell. And get your approval."

"My approval?"

"Er—yes. You see, I've bought the lot right next to the church site. Now, this cottage—er—— Here! Let me show you. We can have the mill work for it shipped in with the church stuff. The same gang that builds the church can run the house up. There's the front elevation. Say, Nell, how do you like it?"

"Why, it's lovely!" she cried.

"Do you think it's nice enough for a parson's wife to live in?"

"Ford! Mr. Hunt! I——"

"Better let the 'Mr. Hunt' stuff slide, Nell Blossom," he said, getting hold of her hand. "Even a minister's wife is supposed to call her husband by his first name—at least, in private."

"Oh, Ford!"

"That's better."

"But—but I am not fit to be a parson's wife, Ford," she cried, trembling.

"Do you know, sometimes I've half believed I wasn't fit to be a parson? But it's my job and I'm going to do the best I can with it. And—I need your help, Nell Blossom."

"I came out here to try to win the heart of Canyon Pass. I found it—almost as soon as I arrived. But I thought for a long time that it never would be

mine. I am bold enough now, Nell, to believe that I may win it."

He smiled at her with such affection in his gaze, such a warmth of comprehension as well as desire, that Nell Blossom, tearful, trembling, half fearful, swayed toward him and felt again his strong arms about her.

"If—if I can only be worthy of you, Ford. If I don't disgrace you," she sobbed. "Just think! A singer all my life in those ugly cabarets——"

"Ah, yes," said the Reverend Willett Ford Hunt quietly. "And only for a difference in environment I might have been a part of the most reckless audience you ever had to sing to. We will let the past bury the past, Nell. We have only to deal with the future."

And he held her to him close.

THE END

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